

Museology with Ronnie Cline

Ologies Podcast

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Heeey. Hi. Hi, it's your buddy Alie Ward. Let's talk about dusty books, and stuffed buffalo, and relics that would make Indiana Jones, just, randy. Museums are those hallowed institutions that we use as marble-tiled storage lockers for history. In this week's episode, I sit down with someone who gets to wear the gloves, and just ignore the velvet rope things, and stick around after the crowds filter out, and keep watch for vintage ghosts. Let's talk about museology, which is a word.

But first, I like to thank you listeners for making this podcast possible. It wouldn't exist without you! This is an entirely independent podcast, made just the scrappy, old-fashion way by a couple of people and no networks and is supported only by listeners like yourself. Thank you for the Patreon donations, which allow me to pay an editor (hi Steven) and for buying merch at OlogiesMerch.com. There are cool t-shirts and stuff up there. Also you rating, and subscribing, and reviewing helps so, so, so much because it keeps *Ologies* up in the charts for other people to discover and say, "Hey, cool podcast." So consider it like voting, it's free and it helps keeps good things happening.

Also, I'm a creep and I read every review because I am thirsty and they make my day. This week the review I want to read is from someone calling himself Nick the Jagoff. Don't need to know why. Such a nice review, essentially said that I'm...

A wild mix between a spirit animal, soulmate, crazy aunt, a devil on my shoulder and a teacher. Can't get enough. [Loves] the podcast.

And then gave me two stars out of five. I think that was an accident Nick the Jagoff, because your review was so glowing and so nice. But I saw that two out of five stars and was like, "Just a slip of the finger." But I enjoyed your words and I enjoy all of your reviews. Thank you so much for leaving them!

Okay, back to museums. Museum, the word, comes from the Greek for the muses. These were goddesses who served to inspire poets. Zeus had nine daughters, all muses of different things like poetry, and astronomy, and dance, and comedy, and tragedy. Nowadays our muses would be like the muse of tweets, and one for memes, and a muse for freestyle rap, or photo cropping, or winged eyeliner. Parallel parking needs a muse. They're all arts.

Now, this ologist has been an internet friend of mine for a few years. I feel like we're homies. His Instagram, [@museumronnie](https://www.instagram.com/museumronnie), is filled with all kinds of magical antiquities, so I was so excited to meet him in person. He's a Museum Collections Manager; he oversees 22 museums for the California Department of State Parks. 22! That's more museums than I have friends. I drove to an industrial district outside of Sacramento one winter's morning to this huge, pristine warehouse. It was filled to its metal gills with immaculate shelves bearing the kind of treasures you'd find in an antique mall if it were also in heaven, and you were dead, and everything was perfect.

He gave me a tour and then we pulled up seats in a conference room and chatted about everything recent fires in Sonoma threatening his state park museums, and evacuations, and his favorite

museum pieces ever, and what curators really think when you take selfies in their exhibits. Also, there's information in here about mummies, and shrunken heads, the changing attitudes toward his-story, and hotdogs. He's great. Please ready your ears and behold the precious wonder of museologist, Ronnie Cline.

Ronnie Cline: I don't think I've ever been interviewed ever.

Alie Ward: Really!?

Ronnie: If this doesn't work you can trash it. I'm okay with it.

Alie: Ronnie, I'm not going to trash this. Tell me about the first museum that you went to. Do you remember?

Ronnie: I do. It was on a field trip. It was in Sacramento. It was the California State Railroad Museum. I do remember kind of just being... I don't know, I feel like we were free and just running around like crazy kids, and jumping through things, and exploring the museum ourselves. No guidance whatsoever.

Alie: Where were the docents during this? They're all sleeping. *[laughs]*

Ronnie: Oh docents. I mean, sweet docents. They're very sweet but sometimes they're a little older than the children that are running around.

Alie: Do you like any museum movies?

Ronnie: I realized that there are no good museum movies that I've seen. I even watched a movie this week in anticipation for this question, thinking it was going to be a good museum movie.

Alie: *[laughs]* Ha! You were doing your homework.

Ronnie: I was. It's called *Bringing Up Baby*. And it's with Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. A romantic comedy. I'm like, "Okay this is up my alley. It's going to be great," and then it was just very frustrating. It has good reviews.

Alie: What museum did it take place in?

Ronnie: In a natural history museum. Cary Grant was a zoologist. Well, he was a zoologist but he was putting together a dinosaur.

Alie: Well. Fake news. What about *Night at the Museum*?

Ronnie: No. I mean, you know, it's fine. I was researching. I was like, "There has to be a good museum movie." I was asking other museum friends and asking the curators like, "Do

you know of any museum movies that feature a curator? There has to be some sort of movie where Tom Hanks is a curator that's, like, sitting with his objects longing for Meg Ryan." But there was nothing at all.

Alie: Doesn't Wonder Woman have like a day job as a museum curator?

Ronnie: I've never seen *Wonder Woman*.

Alie: I think she might work in a museum in the daytime.

Aside: Did a little googling and yes, Wonder Woman aka Diana Prince – I forgot she had another name - is supposed to moonlight or daylight rather as an art historian. Her office in the movie, I went and looked, has ancient swords and a primate skull hanging out on her desk like a half-eaten bagel. She's got a microscope, it's kind of like my personal Pinterest wonderland. I remembered it was cool but had forgotten it was supposed to be at this little place called The Louvre. She's supposed to work at The Louvre, heard of it? Yeh, that part like, slipped my dome.

Alie: Oh, and you know who else is on... Did you ever see *Scandal*?

Ronnie: No, see, I'm terrible at watching things.

Alie: There's a villain in *Scandal* who is a secret operative. His cover, day job, is the curator of the Smithsonian and you're like, "I'm sorry, if you're the curator of the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., you could never get away with having a second life."

Aside: So who handles Papa Pope's Outlook inbox and Wonder Woman's voicemails? Do you know how much work it is to be a curator of antiquities already? You got staff meetings, so much insurance paperwork. Who has time to be a spy or save the world? I don't know, you're about to find out how much work it is. I gotta calm down.

Alie: When you go on vacation, do you go to museums or are you like, [*exhausted voice*] "Enough."?

Ronnie: No, I try to go to museums. It's funny because I mostly adventure around California, working for California State Parks. State parks are kind of the best both worlds; you get museums and you get hiking. State parks bring it all in, so I kind of stick to those.

Alie: Tell me the difference between a national park, and a state park, and just a park park. I'm sorry that I don't know this.

Ronnie: A national park is... Their funds are being cut by Trump.

Aside: There are 59 national parks in the United States and they're overseen by the federal government, for better or for worse. But there are also over 10,000 state parks in the US and they're operated by each individual state. Don't sleep on state parks folks.

Apparently they're super dope and under rated. Admission is cheaper, they're usually less crowded, they have trails, and campsites, and museums on them, like the 22 museums that Ronnie oversees. Dude knows museums.

Alie: Do you have a favorite museum ever or is that a dick question to ask?

Ronnie: You know, it's an interesting question because I do. I got into the museum profession a little bit late in the game. I'm 37 now.

Alie: [*feigned horror*] Oh my god! Ugh!

Ronnie: I know but I'm one year in as a museum collections manager. On my 30th birthday I went to Jack London State Historic Park.

Aside: Quick pause for some much-needed context on Jack London. You're going to want to know this. I didn't know this until I just looked it up and now, I'm low-key obsessed with Jack London, too, I guess? Not to step on Ronnie's personal brand but dude, I love Jack London now.

Jack London was born in the 1870s and he was one of the first celebrity writers to really make it big. He pre-dated Hemmingway. He had serialized stories in magazines and he went on to write a grip of novels like *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild*, and his work usually involved nature and adventure. He was also a war correspondent. He was an advocate for unionization and for animal rights.

He had this crazy life that involved his mother surviving a suicide attempt via gunshot while pregnant with him, then he was raised by Virginia Prentiss, a former slave. At one point he became an oyster pirate (what?!) and then went on to go to the Alaskan Gold Rush, and resided in the South Pacific on a boat called the Snark. Dude could LIVE. He could also die, early at the age of 40, of kidney disease or maybe, possibly, morphine overdose from managing the pain of it. He died in his sleeping porch, which (I looked this up) is a screened-off, breezy area, in his home in Glen Ellen, California. On the property, he and his wife's ashes are under a mossy rock you can go look at.

Anyway, Ronnie is a fan of Jack London, and onward, when you hear his name, feel free to take a large swig of whatever beverage is in front of you to honor him. Or you could do a small dance with your butt in your chair. I don't care, just celebrate. Before Ronnie started working in museums, he visited this Sonoma Valley, Glen Ellen property on his 30th birthday just for funzies.

Ronnie: Because I really loved Jack London, [*soft ding*] I wanted to go see that museum. It's a house museum on one end and it's a regular museum on another. His house museum is my favorite because you get to walk through the halls that he lived in. You get to see the study that he wrote all of his books in and there's a room where he died in. Fast forward seven years later and I'm the collections manager of that museum.

Alie: Oh, I'm gonna cry!

Ronnie: It's amazing, it's really cool. So I look back... like, on my phone, I look back at all these photos of my 30th birthday of me walking through these halls and never thinking, never imagining that I could be the collection manager of that museum.

Alie: So what does it mean to be a museologist? It's a museologist not a museumologist, right?

Ronnie: It's interesting, in America people say museum studies instead of museology. In Europe museology is more popular, but it seems like we're bringing museology back to America. It's kind of an old-timey term.

Alie: I mean, hell yeah, we're bringing it back. We're bringing it back with this particular episode.

Ronnie: I think, right now, it's weird. I think about museums in a different way today than I did maybe two years ago. I think museums, in my mind, have become more important socially than they were two years ago. I think it is a museologist's responsibility to take care of collections but you could be someone that writes exhibit panels, creates exhibits, does the lighting for exhibits; it's very broad. I think in general it means for me, you have the responsibility to invite the public into your space and have it be a space that everyone is welcome. Especially if you're a public museum. That should mean everyone in the public is welcome no matter who they are.

Alie: You don't have to be a savant about lanterns to go to a mining museum?

Ronnie: Not at all. That's the thing that I think is a misconception, which I would love to start changing, is that anybody should go to every museum to learn something.

Alie: You don't have to be an aficionado of the topic. Just go to a museum and you might pick up some inspiration or you might pick up... Even one fact is worth it.

Ronnie: Nowadays with technology and the internet or whatever, you can just go on Wikipedia and read about anything. I think it's a goal, and it should be a goal, for every museum to supply information and an experience that you can't pick up from Wikipedia.

Alie: How do you feel about people who go through museums and photograph all the artifacts? Do you think it's good that they have a picture of it or are you like, "Oh I wish that people were a little bit more in the moment."? Then again, you have pictures from Jack London [*soft ding*] that you're glad that you have. How do you feel about the intersection of people's personal technology and these tactile artifacts that you're in a space with?

Ronnie: I love it. I think that's... Hopefully a lot of the younger museologists feel the same way. I mean, on my Instagram I'm constantly taking pictures of things I'm doing in my museum and sharing them, and video, putting in music, because I think that you want to share the experience with everyone. Especially if you take a picture at Hearst Castle, for example. Nothing beats being there and seeing the image, you know, going to Hearst

Castle, walking through the halls, smelling the smells. So yeah, just sharing the images just hopefully excites people to want to come to the museum.

Alie: Tell me a little bit about museology. What's the educational structure like? Do you study in a classroom about museums? Do you go to museums and lectures, like, "Here's how this has been curated."?

Ronnie: Well the museum world sometimes seems like a secret society. It's hard to get into. I have a major in history, but while I was going to college I spent four years working as a student archivist at California State Parks Photographic Archives. That's where I was introduced to the California State Parks Museum world.

Aside: From there he graduated in 2009, but the recession hit and he thought, "Oof, maybe he was going to be a teacher."

Ronnie: I don't know what I was going to do, something in history. I ended up leaving and starting a hotdog cart. [*Alie laughs*] I had it on my bucket list to have a hotdog cart.

Alie: I already love you. [*laughs*]

Ronnie: When the recession hit I was like, "Well, I guess now's a better time than any to just have a hotdog cart." So I ended up having a hotdog cart on a corner street of downtown Sacramento for two years.

Alie: What was it called?

Ronnie: State Bear Sausage and Dogs. I secretly made my own sausages in my home and sold them there illegally, which was a hit.

Alie: [*laughing*] That's amazing.

Ronnie: And I had five out of five stars on Yelp when I left.

Alie: Yesss!

Aside: I looked it up and this hotdog cart was legit. He served wild boar sausage and he had a Mediterranean dog with feta and cucumbers. There's a photo I found of a be-aproned Ronnie. He's all smiles with a colorful umbrella in the background on a corner in Sacramento. He's holding up a hotdog like a tiny pork trophy.

Ronnie: Anyway, I did that for two years and then I realized, "Do I want to be doing this when I'm 50?" And I thought, "Ah, no. What do I really want to be doing?" It was working in museums.

Alie: What was that epiphany like? Was there a moment where you were, like, stuffing a sausage casing with a ski mask on because it's illegal, and you were like, "No I can't do

this.” Or were you more inspired by something in a museum? What was that moment where you like, “Muh...”?

Ronnie: I strategically placed my hotdog cart on the corner of the headquarters for California State Parks in downtown Sacramento so I would always have connections with state parks people that I used to work with or even knew people. So, I would always have that connection.

Aside: How fucking genius is this?

Ronnie: And the more and more I saw those people, the more and more I realized that I really belonged working for California State Parks.

Alie: That’s so cool. You’d, like, sling sausage and then you’re like, “These are my people.”

Ronnie: Definitely. Yeah, totally.

Alie: That is amazing. Did you put your hotdog cart there on purpose because you like state parks?

Ronnie: There were corners to choose from and I knew that was the corner. I scoped it out. I knew that that was the corner, if I had the opportunity, that’s where I would be and that’s where I was. It’s the windiest corner in Sacramento. You would not believe how windy it is and you would not believe how much wind affects a hotdog cart that goes off of propane gas. It’s very windy, very upsetting.

Alie: But it was worth it?

Ronnie: Oh yeah, I loved it. I mean, I would probably never do it again, but it was a bucket list thing and it was amazing. I owned a hotdog cart.

Alie: Dude, did you ever read *Confederacy of Dunces*?

Ronnie: No.

Alie: It’s about hotdog carts in New Orleans. It’s fascinating, and it’s infuriating, and it gives you so many emotions, but it’s definitely about like #hotdogcartlife.

Aside: This book’s backstory is as fascinating as its actual plot. Rejected by publishers, the author of *Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole, tragically committed suicide at the age of 31. I’m sorry, that is two mentions in one episode. That’s the last one, I promise. His mother, Thelma, found this shabby, smeared, carbon copy of the manuscript atop a cedar armoire after his death and she made it her mission to get it published. She sent it around, and around, and around, and she was rejected over and over until she badgered one publisher so much that he relented. He promised to read it. He was like, “I’m going to read two pages of this just so I can reject it.” And he did and he was like, “Oh dang. This is really good.” It was published 11 years after Toole’s death.

The title of the book is based on a line from a Jonathan Swift essay that reads, "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in a confederacy against him." *Confederacy of Dunces* went on to win a Pulitzer. So, that thing you want to do, just go do it. And if you know it's good, don't give up, keep doing it, eye on the prize like Ronnie and museums.

Alie: When you decided to go into museology, did you have to go back to school for it?

Ronnie: I didn't because while I was a student assistant, I was working with people that became curators for California State Parks. Since I knew where I wanted to work, what I did was I went back and I volunteered for free and kind of apprenticed under people. I helped clean paintings that were taken out of different historic buildings and helped take mold off of different leather objects, briefcases and doctors' bags.

Alie: What do you use to clean paintings? And I have a question in confession for you. This was going to be one of my secrets at the end of the episodes, but I'm just going to ask you right now. Okay, forgive me if you've heard the story. I was in a museum in Santa Barbara and I had to write a paper. It was for an art history class. I was taking notes on a Dutch portrait from the 1600s, beautifully done, and I was up close to it.

At the time I used to wear my watch on my right hand, I now wear it on my left. Even though I'm right-handed, I don't know, I was goth. It was like... I thought maybe it was counterculture to wear it on the wrong hand. It was a mistake. I had a pen in my hand taking notes. I had an overcoat on because it was raining. I stretched my hand up to pull my sleeve back to check my watch, and I heard this zure-zurp. [*Ronnie quietly groans in pain*] Ballpoint pen across the face of a Dutch painting from the 1600s.

I panicked. It was the worst moment of my life. The worst and I was thinking, "What am I going to do, what am I going to do? Like, I'm screwed. This thing is worth like a million dollars. I'm broke. My parents do not have the money to help with this at all." I was borrowing money to buy books. And this is the most dishonest thing I've ever done, I just left. I left museum. I couldn't handle it. I was so afraid. Someone from the same class is like, "Hey did you see that pen mark?" and I was like *nervous inhale*]. Linda, she was the only person I ever told about it in class until years later. But how screwed was that painting?

Ronnie: Why would you tell, for one? Like, who would you tell?

Alie: I don't know!

Ronnie: [*mock graveness*] I would run, I would run really fast. I don't know who I would tell. I mean, jeez.

Alie: I don't know. I was like, "If I tell someone then maybe they'll arrest me. But either way they're going to have to clean it or they're going to throw this painting in the garbage." It was a moral quandary unlike any I've ever been in. What can they do?

Ronnie: [*relaxed*] They take it to a conservator.

Aside: I didn't know what a conservator was during the interview but I just looked it up. It's a person who helps restore shit that gets messed up in museums. So boom, there is a person for that. [*deep sigh*]

Ronnie: Then the conservator gives it back to them and it looks like it's never been touched by a ballpoint pen before.

Alie: OH, so many years!!

Ronnie: [*laughs*] No one will ever know. I mean, you know, you *did* ruin it. [*Alie laughing*] It will be ruined forever. At the heart of the matter the painting is ruined. It's never going to be the same; the original artwork is ruined. But to the public it looks the same. [*chuckles*]

Alie: NO! Is it really ruined?

Ronnie: I mean, it's not the same, but it's fine.

Alie: Do they have to paint over it or do they clean the ink off?

Ronnie: I am not a conservator, but I would hope that they can remove the ink somehow. You know, distilled water and a Q-tip does amazing things with patience.

Alie: Oooh myyy gaawd. There was a video that was going around the internet recently about a painting that was being cleaned. They were taking off years of varnish. It had yellowed and it had a really sepia color. Underneath the painting was very vibrant and had a lot more cooler tones. Is that real?

Ronnie: Yes. It's amazing, I've seen videos of dresses where they submerge these dresses that have a yellow tinge to them and then they bring them up and they're beautifully white. What we think of how things looked back 200 years ago, because we do have a varnish over everything. But no, everything was bright.

Alie: I know, we have such a sepia memory.

Ronnie: Very much so.

Alie: Do you have a favorite artifact or one that you, every time you see it or think about it, you just go, "Oh, that is so cool"?

Ronnie: There's quite a few. I mean, like I said about Jack London, [*soft ding*] that does have a special place in my heart. And his wife Charmian is starting to take over my love for his stuff. I'm starting to love her stuff more and more, the more I know about her. So anything that she had... There's a holster that she had and she wore during their trips to the Pacific Islands, which was amazing. There was a photograph of her in the holster, which I think it was *Cosmopolitan* magazine, I cannot remember, back in the old days

like in the early 1900s, wouldn't publish the photograph because it showed a woman wearing a holster. It was very risqué.

Alie: But they probably had a whole article on [*old-timey voice*] 14 ways to tickle his bottom so that he loves you more. [*laughs*]

Ronnie: Exactly, totally. She was very progressive, an equestrian. She was very adamant to not ride side saddle. She even altered her dresses. She was the first person to start altering her dresses so she can ride normal, not ride side saddle.

Alie: What a BAMF. What a badass.

Ronnie: She's really awesome. And after Jack London passed away, she had all of these fun affairs with Harry Houdini and stuff.

Alie: Hellooo. Time machine, party with her.

Ronnie: Yeah, totally.

Alie: Charmon was her name?

Ronnie: Charmion.

Aside: She was Jack's second wife and was five years his senior. [*salaciously*] Oh, scandal, gasp, smelling salts, fainting couch. She was also a 'New Woman', which was the old-timey, late 1800s term for feminist.

Alie: I'm going to rename myself Charmion. I'm going to steal her life.

Ronnie: So anything of hers... You can still go to her powder room. There's a secret entry and a secret, spiral staircase that goes into her powder room. It's really neat.

Alie: Oh man. Can the public access that?

Ronnie: They cannot and they don't know where it's at.

Alie: [*gasps*] Oh my god. This brings me to a question that I feel like I didn't know until I started working with the Natural History Museum. What you see on display, and in these acrylic cases, and with these placards that say what it is, is a fraction of what a museum actually has in collections. We just toured a warehouse full of stuff that I was boggled by, everything from bassinets, to lanterns, to wagons. How do you choose what goes on display versus what stays in these collections that are off limits?

Ronnie: It's a very interesting selection. Where we toured today, we walked past probably one aisle that had 200 or more lanterns. Unless you're a lantern museum, you really can't display 200 or more lanterns. But we do keep them because people donate them and we don't want to turn down donations.

Researchers are more than welcome to come. I think it's like this pretty much with most museums, that if you're a researcher or if you're just someone that's researching your family history... You don't have to be a professional researcher, you can just be anybody that's interested in something. Just as long as you search it out, I would be more than happy to open my doors and show you. But then also there's rotating exhibits, too. I want to do more of those in my museums. I don't just have one museum. It's a very unique experience that I'm working in where I manage the collections of over 30,000 items in 22 different parks.

Alie: WHAT!?

Ronnie: So we can't get to them all, unfortunately. It's very hard to get to most of them, but most of them are collected in a lump of five different locations.

Alie: Wow, that's so many items. Wait. 22 different parks, 30,000 items.

Ronnie: Yes.

Alie: How do you keep a record? Is there a spreadsheet?

Ronnie: Well, there's multiple spreadsheets. We use what's called the TMS, the Museum System Database. Many museums use it; the Smithsonian uses it. We are opening it up so that the public can go on if they want to research lanterns or if they want to research anything really. Thimbles, or wigs, or dairy containers, we have them. You can just find them and then you can come and look up all your dairy containers.

Alie: What is your house like? Are you very organized? Do you like knickknackery or are you very clutter free? How has being a museologist changed the way you live?

Ronnie: That is a good question. My house is orderly until you get to the very back room. You know how some people have a junk drawer? I wouldn't say the back room's a junk room but it's just a room at the end where you, like, open the door up and throw something and then close it real quick. But other than that, I do like older paintings. Even if it's a painting that a husband made of his wife in the 1950s that I found in a thrift store. I appreciate that and I'll maybe purchase that and put it up in my house.

Alie: What was it like getting the job of being a curator of all this? What was the interview process like and how did you know you were qualified for it? And what happened when they said, "You got the job!"

Ronnie: This is a very unique situation to the California State Parks which I encourage a lot of people who are interested in the field to look into because a lot of people miss it and it's a really great opportunity. What I did was I gained all this experience. I had four years of experience as a student assistant and then I also apprenticed for a while. So an exam opened up.

Aside: To get a job with the state park system, you don't just interview and charm your way into a ranger's hat. You have to take an exam first before they even will sit down with you, no matter how much they liked your hotdog cart.

Ronnie: And you have to qualify within the top three rankings to be reachable to have an interview for the job.

Alie: Oh my god.

Ronnie: Yes, it was very intense. I took the exam. I ranked 1, which is amazing.

Alie: Yeah! [*DJ airhorn*]

Ronnie: I was very happy about that. Then once you take the exam, you have to wait for a job to open up. So, a job did open up.

Alie: Did you kill someone?

Ronnie: No, but the job that opened up was an hour and a half drive away from my house.

Alie: That's *as* laborious as doing a hit on someone.

Ronnie: Totally. But, you know, I don't mind. It's a very peaceful drive. I live in Sacramento and the job that opened up was in Sonoma. It was also my dream job because it involved Jack London [*soft ding*] State Historic Park. So, I applied for the job and then I got it. That's how it works.

Alie: How did they tell you that you got it? Did they send over a carrier pigeon or did they do something with antiquity? [*old-timey voice*] Send you a telegram?

Ronnie: No. I just heard my boss get the call. You know, the reference-check call.

Alie: Oh my god!

Ronnie: It was amazing! I was in the other room at my desk and I just heard her and I'm like "Oh, so good."

Alie: Was she sad to lose you though?

Ronnie: Yes. I think she hung up the phone and said, "Damn it, Ronnie!"

Alie: [*laughs*] Oh my gosh. Did you celebrate?

Ronnie: Oh it was amazing, yeah.

Alie: What did you do?

Ronnie: Did I actually celebrate? I'm sure I just probably went for unlimited sushi. That's my celebration.

Alie: [*laughing*] That's so dope. What is your day like, day to day? Do you come in and see if anything's been missing, or broken, or needs tending to? You're up in Sonoma. We had this scheduled for last month around Thanksgiving, but Sonoma was going through some of the worst wildfires in state history.

Ronnie: Yes. So my day-to-day schedule since then, since October, has been kind of not day-to-day-schedule. We did evacuate. We have an emergency evacuation plan. The fires were coming. It was very intense. We were able to evacuate all of the threatened areas, which included six moving trucks of objects. We brought them to the facility we're at today, which as you can see, this place is huge so it was able to house all of those artifacts and all those objects. We were able to get out.

Alie: How did you pick though? I mean, you can't move several different homes worth of artifacts. How do you pick what to take? It's like that horrible thing, "If you had to evacuate your house in a fire what would you take?" "Ahh, my stuffed animal!" But with priceless artifacts in many locations.

Ronnie: The curator that I work with who's been there for 30 years, she devised a disaster preparedness plan which included a laminated sheet of objects to take first in any kind of emergency. So we just grabbed those laminated sheets and then we started evacuating those immediately. We had more volunteers than we knew what to do with, so before we knew it, we got everything that was on the list out. Then what? Then we just started evacuating everything and we did get out everything, which was amazing.

Alie: Like down to what? The rugs and stuff?

Ronnie: Down to the rugs, down to boxes of books. We did a great job. It was really cool and I'm very thankful to her because she had it all planned out. It was amazing.

Alie: Then what's the process of moving that stuff back in? None of the structures burned down?

Ronnie: None of the structures burned down. We actually were Thermo-Gelling, which is like spraying this big hose full of Jell-O over all of the historic houses and structures so if the fire came, then it would not burn them. We did that. The fire didn't come and we had to remove all that, but we were able to get everything here. Then the process of moving it back has been... That's what's taking so long. It took like one or two days to get everything out, but it takes months to actually organize it and put it all back in.

Alie: Ooof. Is there anything else that you're discovering in moving out like, "Oh, I didn't realize we had this comb that had fallen under a floorboard"?

Ronnie: No, I don't think so.

Alie: No cool discoveries? You know how when you move, you're like, "Oh my god, I forgot I had this bracelet!"

Ronnie: Well, one thing that has been pretty cool is we've had time to go through the diaries of day-to-day occurrences at the museums from the 80s. Because, I don't know, when do you have time to go through these? So, we were just flipping through a book and at one time in the 80s, California State Parks had a wine-tasting bar set up in a museum which is not allowed now. Now I'm thinking we need to bring back wine-tasting bars.

Alie: Just don't do it in a historically preserved area with a bunch of red wine and hair gel.

Ronnie: It's amazing. When I worked at the Photographic Archives as a student assistant, going through photographs of the 1950s of curators smoking and drinking, well, mostly smoking, over historic artifacts, it's amazing.

Alie: I wonder about that sometimes. How much damage was done to artifacts just from people smoking indoors?

Ronnie: Totally.

Alie: Like all the yellowing and stuff. You're like, "How much of that is just Winston Salems?"

Ronnie: I was talking to an archaeologist the other day and he's been doing it for 40 years. He said that back in the early days they would take the dung of different animals and just throw it at each other for fun. But now you can find out so much information. Things you didn't know back then.

Alie: There's this one archaeologist on Twitter I follow that I want to get. She's a bio-archaeologist and she digs through old toilets and some graves to figure out things about people. I'm like, "I've got to get her on."

Aside: I'm looking at you, bioarcheologist/osteologist Steph Halmhofer, aka @bones_canada on Twitter.

Alie: What's the difference between a museologist and an archaeologist?

Ronnie: A museologist just focuses on the museum itself. Archaeologists are more out in the field working. They have more of a science background. Museologists have a focus on the care and collection of objects, integrated pest management systems, to monitor the objects make sure they're doing okay. That's one of the worst things about my job is that you have to kill so many insects. I'm setting up pheromone traps for moths, but it has to be done. I think in one of your previous episodes someone said, "Bugs are the worst."

Alie: Yes, the ornithologist who had been held up at gunpoint on the job said the worst thing about his job was carpet beetles.

Ronnie: Yeah, carpet beetles are terrible. Cigarette beetles, carpet beetles. The beetles have fun names, too, within the museum community.

Alie: What do they call them?

Ronnie: Well, just like cigarette beetles.

Alie: Cigarette beetles? So you have to set up pheromone traps where they're like, "Oh, smells like ladies," and then they hop in there and they're like, "Douh!"

Ronnie: Yeah, exactly. It's kind of sad too, but you take these special pheromone capsules and you put them in the sticky traps.

Alie: Can you smell anything?

Ronnie: No.

Alie: You don't have long enough antennae.

Ronnie: I guess not.

Alie: They can smell like a molecule of a pheromone from miles away. Moths are amazing; they can detect it with their antenna.

Aside: Let's talk about moth horniness. A female moth releases one billionth of a gram of pheromones to signal [*Tiffany Haddish, "She ready!"*] like a tiny winged Tiffany Haddish, and researchers have reported that a male Indian luna moth can locate a female 6.5 miles (11 km) away. They are like, "Let's get this on." So, pheromone traps are like getting messaged by a bot and then the bot kills you.

Alie: Do some rapid fire?

Ronnie: Sure.

Alie: Okay, now you've listened to the podcast before. We got so many questions on Patreon and I think you're a patron. Did you do that so that you could cheat and look at the questions first?

Ronnie: 50/50. [*Alie laughs*] I did it to support you and to also know what I'm getting into. [*both laughing*]

Alie: That's amazing, okay. These are patrons. Colin McCarville wants to know: How do you feel museums have evolved and how do you think they're going to change in the future?

Ronnie: Well, museums in America, for one, were set up by rich, white men to promote rich, white men. Fast forwarding to modern day, they're evolving because I think museums need to interpret not what the rich, white man's perspective is, but what the person of

that time, the average person or everyone's perspective. Including the rich, white man's perspective but also including the poor person that maybe isn't white's perspective.

I think that's where museums right now are changing. Even in California the school curriculum is changing with it as well, which is going to be pretty amazing in the next five years to see the change. So when you walk into a museum that, like, is a mission, it talks more about the Native American life, not as someone that was saved by the mission, but someone that was held there against their will. It's going to be pretty exciting to be able to expand that education.

Alie: The narrative is getting more objective than it has been in the past, so his-story is not...?

Ronnie: I was thinking about that last night; I couldn't sleep last night. The word his-story, it just kept coming back to me and I'm like, "Goddammit. I wish we could change the name of history. How do we change it?" I was just going through my head and I was like, "Our story, their story. What can you change it to?"

Alie: Ourstory. *[laughs]*

Ronnie: You know what? That sounds kind of weird right now, but probably his-story, history sounds weird, too, if you've never heard it. You just keep calling it 'our story' then everyone will call it our story.

Alie: I mean, language is elastic; it evolves. That's interesting. That's good to know that it's evolving like that. I'd never thought about that.

Ronnie: Isn't it weird to think about women's history? Women's his-story. That seems so weird to me.

Alie: That just gave me anger-induced goosebumps. Ugh. It's so crazy how barely out of the dark ages we are. This is still a dark age. We're in a dark age.

Ronnie: We're in a dark age.

Alie: Laura Eisen [phonetic] wants to know: Have you ever used cool or weird stuff from the museum to impress a *[singsong]* daaate?

Ronnie: Oooh. Unfortunately I haven't.

Alie: God, Ronnie! Jeez!

Ronnie: I know.

Alie: You could steal so much cool stuff. What's the most expensive artifact you've ever dealt with or handled? That's such a cheesy question but, I'm sorry, I'm gonna ask.

Ronnie: It's interesting because some of the artifacts are [*ominously for humor*] priceless, so we don't know how much they are. Just from the sentimental point of view, just the other day I was holding Jack London's camera. [*soft ding*] He's an amazing photographer and took photos of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco. His photographs are amazing.

Aside: These photos appear in a book, *The Paths Men Take*, published in 2016 and on the State Parks website, which I'm going to add to all the episode links at AalieWard.com/Ologies. Ronnie also says that some artifacts that aren't on display can get loaned to museums all over the world, kind of like a shirt that you lend to your roommate before a trip, hoping she doesn't get mustard on it.

Ronnie: We do share them so other museums can display them and share the story of Jack London, [*soft ding*] as well.

Alie: Like, "Hey, we're doing a canoe exhibit. You got anything cool?" And you're like, "Do we!"

Ronnie: Totally.

Alie: Like, canoe send it over? Get it? Canoe? Can you... canoe send it over?

Ronnie: Canoe send it over?

Alie: Sorry, I don't know what was about. [*ba-dum-TSH!*] Okay, Mary Ann Moss wants to know: How do you recommend tackling visiting a museum when you're short on time? She says: I always feel like I haven't done a place justice unless I've seen everything, but a lot of time that's not possible. Follow up question: What do you do about museum fatigue? Sometimes you're like, "I'm so tired of seeing so much stuff."

Ronnie: The technology, let it work for you. Before you go, if you're the passenger of a car and you're driving there with your boyfriend or girlfriend and you have an hour to kill, just look it up on Instagram, on Yelp, on something, and see what is there. And if you want to breeze through a lot of it, fine. But I think you should find one thing that you are interested in and really focus on it. Have you heard of this thing called Museum Sage?

Alie: No.

Ronnie: There's this thing called Museum Sage. It's a program that someone started and they're doing it in certain museums where they'll take you in the lobby and they'll blindfold you. You pick locations like, "Turn left, turn right here," turn wherever, and they guide you up to whatever you choose, whatever painting or sculpture or object. Before you take the blindfold off, you think of a question you should ask yourself deeply. Something that you're struggling with. It could be, "Will I ever get this job?" or, "What should I do with my life?" or, "What kind of car should I buy?" Whatever you want to do, just think of it yourself. They take off the blindfold and you stare at whatever they show you, and you find the answer in that painting or whatever.

Alie: Oh my god. That's amazing!

Ronnie: I think you can always just choose one thing to really focus in on because I think you can really find a lot about yourself or about anything you want in that one thing.

Aside: I looked on their website which is conveniently MuseumSage.com, and they have videos you guys. Viiiddeos! Like this one where a woman named Kim asks a 12th century vase what to do with her career:

Staff: So, whenever you are ready, you can open your eyes.

Kim: Oh my god, it's like Christmas.

Staff: I know it is. It is.

Kim: Okay, this is not what I expected at all.

Alie: What will Kim do?!? I am so invested.

Ronnie: We have a tribe liaison who coordinates with the governor's liaison with Native Americans. We're probably a little bit different in that regard since we are a government agency.

Alie: Zoe Teplick, great question: Have you ever encountered any haunted artifacts or any objects that just gave you the willies?

Ronnie: There's a house museum that I take care of. It's the Vallejo Home in Sonoma, and Vallejo's wife is known to haunt the house and hate English speakers. So any time you speak English in there, she gets very mad.

Alie: [*whispering*] No way. Have you been there?

Ronnie: I have been there.

Alie: What does it feel like?

Ronnie: I wait for her to yell at me and she hasn't yet. You know when you want a ghost to yell at you, it never happens.

Alie: They're such jerks.

Ronnie: Yeah. I also take care of a building called the Toscana Hotel. One time I was trying to film a video for Instagram, and the music wasn't working, and I was like trying to do a Billy Joel song to some sort of weird thing or something. And the music didn't work, but when I replayed it there were men's voices in the background and there are definitely no men there.

Alie: Whaaat? Do you believe in ghosts?

Ronnie: Sure, yeah, I'm open to it. I would love to see a ghost.

Alie: You wouldn't be freaked out?

Ronnie: No. I would love for Jack London [*soft ding*] to come hang out with me.

Alie: Yeah. He's just, like, your ghost homie.

Ronnie: Totally.

Alie: Hannah wants to know: What is your favorite exhibit you've worked on?

Ronnie: I was preparing an object to be on display. It was a dress made of human hair. I was picking out dead bugs from the early 1900s from this dress with, like, tweezers and microscope. I had a lot of fun working on that.

Alie: All in a day's work.

Ronnie: All in a day's work.

Alie: Jennifer Overbye wants to know: I've heard museums have basements chock full of cool stuff hidden away. In terms of the collections, why are you so sneaky with your stuff and how do I get down there?

Ronnie: Come see my stuff. Always, yes. If you're interested in anything that is... It's not hidden away as much as it's in proper conditions, the climate is proper for them to be stored. And like I said, if we have 200 lanterns, you want to be able to take care of the lanterns and have them in a proper environment that can they can be there forever so if someone does want to research them, they'll be there for them to look at.

Alie: So just ask for more tours.

Ronnie: Yeah, you can get a tour. If you ask, you can see stuff.

Alie: Blake Hawkins wants to know: On average, how many pieces in a museum's collection are authentic versus well-crafted replicas?

Ronnie: Now if it's an actual museum, I would say most of it is authentic. But house museums are a different story because you do need to set up the house and make it look like it's from that time, and a lot of times you acquire houses maybe a hundred years after the year you want interpret. So you do piece together objects from that time period but maybe not necessarily from that house specifically.

Alie: Okay, so there might be a phone on the wall that is of the same year but it wasn't that particular phone that was used.

Ronnie: Yeah and if you can go off of, like, photographs, you try to match things up as much as best you can.

Alie: Claudia Louise wants to know if you ever feel overwhelmed by the amount of history around you.

Ronnie: No never. I love the amount of history around me, though I do feel overwhelmed that I should know everything. So, I guess in a sense, yes, because there's so much to know. Especially with my position having 30,000 objects and 22 different parks. Each park has its own history that spans hundreds of years. I guess that is overwhelming in a sense.

Alie: Do you get texts or calls the middle of the night like, "Ah, something broke!"

Ronnie: From the fire, yes. When we had the fire it's like, "Okay, let's rally the troops and get this going."

Alie: I was so worried. You were like, "Can we postpone the interview?" I was like, "Yeah, I think that's fine. Your entire city's on fire and you are a curator of museums. Yeah, that's a good idea." Jason Neuman from the Facebook group wants to know: Is there a friendly rivalry between different museums of the same type? Or do natural history museums make jokes about modern art museums?

Ronnie: No. Actually I think that there's a good relationship between the museums, for me especially. I think that we work great together.

Alie: You guys play nice?

Ronnie: Yeah, totally.

Alie: You're not super museum bitches?

Brit Pitcher [phonetic] wants to know: Can I come be your friend?

Ronnie: Of course.

Alie: Nick Van Acker [ph.] wants to know: Do you have an artifact or specimen that you would love to see on display in a museum that never will be because it's too gross, or too big, or too fragile?

Ronnie: Right now, there are some Native American objects that are used for ceremonial purposes and probably won't ever be displayed. We have a shrunken head from an island that probably won't go on display right now. There's some really neat stuff.

Alie: Do you have a lot of human artifacts?

Ronnie: Surprisingly. It's very interesting. Not necessarily human bones but hair. Hair is big. I mean, especially in Victorian era, you have a lot of human hair.

Alie: They made a lot of memento mori things out of that right? I need to look up how shrunken heads work. Do they take the skull out?

Ronnie: I don't even know. I don't get it. I saw my first one when I was like 10 in a Ripley's Believe It or Not exhibit.

Alie: Does the image of it haunt you?

Ronnie: It's creepy. It's very creepy.

Alie: There's a curio store in Seattle that's just on the pier that has a couple of mummified humans.

Ronnie: How does that work?

Alie: I'm like, "Is that legal?"

Ronnie: Yeah, I don't understand how that works.

Alie: It's just a corpse and, like, dead. It's very weird.

Aside: So yes, to make a shrunken head one first removes the skull and then stretches the face skin over a small wooden ball and boils it. In terms of DIY projects, I'd give this one a pass. These were ceremoniously made in the Amazon rainforest. They were thought to harness an enemy's power. Then the tourism trade caused a bump in sales -- both of real and of fakes -- in the early 1900s and that is where we get the term 'headhunting'. [*singsong*] Ding. Horrifying!

Also, that shop on Seattle's waterfront is called Ye Olde Curiosity Shop. Very on the nose. It's been there, owned by the same family for four generations, since the 1890s. The mummy that's just straight-up on display in a glass case like a fucking croissant is named Sylvester. I just went down, I want you to know, a 2-hour rabbit hole about him.

I'm just going to condense it and say he is thought to be a wild-west outlaw who was shot in the gut and quickly embalmed in arsenic by a conman named Soapy. Then he fell into the hands of the Seattle Curio Emporium in the 1950s. Also, he got shot in the face with buckshot at one point in his life, never went to a doctor and his skin just healed over it. He is not for sale, but evidently it is legal to buy and display human remains. However, birth control pills are not available over the counter and you can't buy wine coolers in some counties. Oh well. Okay, back to rapid fire.

Alie: These are great questions. Heather Crowther wants to know: Who writes the blurbs next to the artifacts? Is it a curator, a historian? Who gets that job?

Ronnie: It probably depends on the museum. For California State Parks, we have an interpreter who writes the exhibit panels, does the research and everything. For me, I'm a curator right now; museum technician, technically, which is pretty much a curator, so I don't get to do that. But we do have input.

Alie: Are museum people chill? This is my own question.

Ronnie: I think so.

Alie: Or are they uptight because they're like, "Everything has to be perfect"?

Ronnie: I think it depends on age. *[laughs]* No, it really doesn't. I'm not ageist. But I think, honestly, the older someone is who has worked in the museum, they've been there for 30 years or something, so it's their baby. When something is your baby you do become protective of it. So you have these new, young museum professionals that are like, "What? Let's give the world this!" and then people that have been there for 30 years are just a little more protective.

Alie: Amy Tenberge. *[French accent]* Tenberge... I'm sure I'm saying that wrong. Great question: What are the most annoying things visitors do? She says: People so often dampen *[her]* enjoyment of museums with their behavior. How do you stay sane working with that every day? What do visitors do that you're like, "What?! No!!"

Ronnie: Touch! Touch! Touch! Like reach across any kind of velvet rope, any stanchion.

Aside: Those velvet ropes that are used in museums and nightclubs to convey "Don't!" are called stanchions. They come from the French for 'beam' or 'support'. Did you know you can buy them on Amazon for \$90? For less than a Benjamin, you can erect a velvet rope on your own porch and you can feel like a very elite baller every time you come home. Back to museum etiquette.

Ronnie: People don't care. Selfies are fine, but selfies over the stanchion or trying to touch things that you shouldn't. It boggles my mind. You can go on YouTube and watch all these crazy mishaps of people just wanting to touch things. It's so weird. I don't get it.

Alie: Shannon Feltus says: Real talk. Do you have that ancient tablet that makes the museum come to life at night?

Ronnie: No.

Aside: To be fair, he's probably lying. He probably does have an ancient, magical tablet and is just not telling us.

Alie: Your job. What is your least favorite thing about your job? What suuucks?

Ronnie: I knew you were going to ask this and I guess it would just have to be the paperwork. When you're filling out loan agreements, that's not fun but it doesn't, like, *suck* suck. Even if I'm working on something like a gravestone or out in the rain in the middle of Bothe-Napa State Park, you're still in the middle of Bothe-Napa State Park and next to a gravestone. So yeah, I don't know.

Alie: So it's mostly the desky...?

Ronnie: Sure, yeah, desk stuff. Who wants to do desk stuff when you can just go across the hall and fiddle around with an object?

Alie: Yeah. You're allowed to touch it because you're wearing gloves and stuff right, and because you're responsible if it breaks?

Ronnie: Yeah, exactly.

Alie: Favorite thing about your job?

Ronnie: Honestly just going. I get to my work every day before the sun comes up. I get there at 7:00 in the morning. I get up at 4:15 every day. It's pretty crazy but I get there and I'm the first one there. I love just having the keys and opening the door to my building. It's a wooden door in these 1800s barracks and I just like walking into it. It's fun.

Alie: I should figure this question out for myself. I might have to google this, but why do museums smell so good? Why do old books smell good? What are we smelling when we smell old, cool stuff?

Ronnie: I just think we're smelling history. I think history smells good. I just got a cologne that I've haven't tried yet but it's called Book.

Alie: What!?!

Ronnie: It's amazing. I'm excited to try it. I don't even know who makes it. I just got it for Christmas, a little sample of it. Someone was like, "Oh, I know you would like this." It was just Book.

Alie: Oh my gosh. I would need to order that!

Aside: Why do old books smell so good? I just googled the shit out of this and it turns out that paper is made of cellulose and lignin from wood pulp. When they degrade, they throw off volatile, organic compounds that smell a lot like vanilla and almonds. Turns out there are a few colognes formulated to smell like old books. They have names like Paperback, In the Library, Book, and Dead Writers. I applaud all of them for not opting for the less huff-friendly name of Book Worm.

Alie: Do you have any future goals? Is there anything in terms of being a museologist that you're like, "I want to do this before the end of my career"?

Ronnie: Totally. I do think that a lot of exhibits can be updated and can be more inclusive. I do want to change that. I do have that as a goal.

To see what Ronnie Cline's day-to-day life as a museologist entails, follow his very wonderful Instagram. It's [@MuseumRonnie](#). And as long as you're there, you might want to check out

[@Grannythedog](#), which is his scruffy rescue pup who is very cute. I am proud to say I was her first follower. I was on that! He was like, “Hey, I’ve got...” Boom. Follow.

You can also follow [@Ologies](#) or [@AlieWard](#) on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#). You can join the amazing [Facebook Ologies Podcast](#) group, which is adminned by Erin Talbert (thank you!) and Hannah Lipow, who just moved to Boston, in case anyone in Boston needs a new, awesome, smart friend. We’ll miss her so, so much in California. I can’t even talk about it without crying but I’m so proud of her for this adventure and for her work as an attorney for the ACLU there. Hello. Boston, I’m relying on you to be cool and make her feel at home.

Thank you, Steven Ray Morris, for editing this on a very, very tight turnaround while I succumbed this week to various shitstorms, such as a New York blizzard and the flu, very, very slow hotel Wi-Fi. The theme song was written and recorded by Nick Thorburn of the band Islands.

If you make it through the credits, you know I share a secret with you. Okay, here’s the secret for this week: I’ve shoplifted one time in my life because I can’t deal with the guilt of doing it otherwise. It was when I had very low blood sugar and I was in a Rite Aid and I had to get a Clif Bar immediately. I was feeling very woozy and the line was out the door. They were taking forever and I stole the Clif Bar. It was carrot cake flavor. I feel bad about it still to this day. At one point I thought about getting a carrot cake Clif Bar and somehow antishoplifting it and smuggling it back in, but I thought that would be weirder. So, Rite Aid, I’m sorry. I owe you probably \$2.69 or something.

Okay. Berbye.

Transcribed by Nicole Smith, Washington, District of Columbia

Some links for your perusal:

[Wonder Woman’s day job at the Louvre](#)

[Jack London’s crazy life](#)

[The last known footage of Jack London](#)

[State Parks are cool, for real](#)

[Now I want a sleeping porch](#)

[Ronnie’s #HotDogLyfe](#)

[Confederacy of Dunces backstory](#)

[What is a conservator](#)

[I think I fucked up this painting](#)

I want to interview [this bioarcheologist](#) on [Twitter](#)

[Moths get horny](#)

[Jack London's 1906 earthquake photos](#)

["Jack London: Paths Men Take" book trailer](#)

[Shrunken head facts](#)

[Sylvester the Mummy's MRI](#)

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