

Women in museum computing: A brief history of data entry & skilled labor

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IBM Selectric
(Image courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields)

Museum collections are many things, but primarily they function as repositories of information, where data-intensive work has been conducted for decades. Like other knowledge infrastructures, the information in museum collections is built on installed bases and require highly skilled technicians to maintain these long-lasting digital systems. However, in representations of this computing work, women's voices and perspectives are under-appreciated, even though they have significant labor contributions in this area.

My dissertation examines the experiences of women working in computing roles within museum collections and seeks to understand their unique approaches to data management. Drawing from this research, this talk will explore some of the early gendered data practices at both the Smithsonian Institution and the Metropolitan Museum of Art— two highly regarded institutions whose leadership in early museum computing has had lasting implications on museum best practices, and the value given to tasks like data entry.