

MUSEUMS AND TEACHING HISTORY

John Hensley
St. Louis Science Center

History teachers have long recognized the value in taking their students to museums. Visits to museums can be enhanced, however, if the teacher prepares in advance. Moreover, museums can provide resources for teachers and their students that transcend the visit. This paper outlines the functions of museums and explains how these functions can relate to teaching history. In addition, this paper gives advice on how to counsel students who wish to pursue careers in historical agencies and museums.

Understanding Museum Functions

Students often hold museums in low esteem. Many regard museums in much the same way as the writer who described museums as places "where every separate object kills every other and all of them together [kill] the visitor."¹ This may be a fair description of museums in the past and of some contemporary museums that function only in traditional ways. Most modern museums, however, are not musty warehouses filled with curiosities; they are vibrant places staffed by energetic people who plan exciting activities that make the past "come alive." When students learn this, they begin to think of museums as worthwhile places to visit, learn, and work.

Students and teachers should know that museums and colleges share many attributes. Barbara H. Butler and Adrienne L. Horn have observed:

As broad-based institutions of learning, museums and universities have a great deal in common. They hold seminars and lectures series; they have well-established libraries and slide collections. Museum professionals and university professors are the products of essentially the same academic training. They deal with the same subject matter; they read and write for the same journals; they often do the same jobs. Many museum professionals hold adjunct professorships at nearby universities, and professors are frequently asked to be guest lecturers at museum symposiums and to write exhibit catalogs.²

Despite similarities, there is a difference between museum professionals and professors that has traditionally kept them apart. University and college professors depend on written sources; they seldom use objects in their research and teaching. Museum professionals use objects in their research and teach, for the most part, through exhibits and by using objects. The two have gone in different directions which led to misunderstandings and a lack of appreciation for each others' methods. Fortunately, these misunderstandings are decreasing as more graduates in the humanities seek careers in museums.³ College faculty and museum staff are beginning to realize that they have a great deal to offer each other.

Museums offer the most to teachers who familiarize themselves with the functions of museums. A clear understanding of what museums do helps the teacher decide how to use museums. The American Association of Museums defines a museum as "an organized and permanent non-profit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule."⁴ Museums have seven functions, all of which can relate to the teaching of history: (1) collecting, (2) research, (3) conservation, (4) exhibition, (5) interpretive education, (6) serving as community centers, and (7) acting as social agents.

Museums as Resources for Teaching History

Museums provide many resources for teachers and students. Visits to museums and historic houses "recapture" the sights, sounds, and smells of the past for students. Objects on loan from collections for use in the classroom can convey a "sense of the past" in a special way. Projects in museums introduce students to museum work and to the use of objects in their own research, writing, and teaching methods.⁵ Collaborations between museums and colleges can serve both institutions in beneficial ways.

Preparing for a visit to a museum entails more than arranging transportation and attending to logistical details. The teacher should go to the museum before the visit and evaluate its exhibits. Contact museum staff, tour the collections storage areas, and discuss with the staff the kind of presentation that will be most appropriate for the class. The teacher can prepare students for the visit by introducing the museum and its major themes within the context of coursework. This kind of preparation helps ensure a worthwhile visit and gives the teacher a chance to explore other ways to use the museum, its staff, and collections.

Exhibits are the most easily recognized educational tool in museums. There are many kinds of museum exhibits, from modest local history society efforts to spectacular "blockbusters" sponsored by consortia of governments, cultural agencies, and museums. Museums use their collections in exhibits to inspire and inform, and incidentally to entertain. Permanent exhibits present the museum's major themes and display landmark pieces from collections. Temporary exhibits explore special, related themes and provide opportunities for displaying objects from the museum's collections brought from storage or objects borrowed from other institutions.⁶

According to E. McClung Fleming, exhibits represent projects as fully important as published works; they involve the same process, judgments, correlations, and conclusions.⁷ Like publications, museum exhibits used in teaching must be evaluated by teachers. Reviewing an exhibit, however, is not the same as reviewing a book or an article. A museum professional considers things in an exhibit review, such as the quality of fabrication and the adequacy of security measures, not applicable to a book review. Teachers need not worry about such technical facets of exhibits, but they should evaluate these five aspects of any exhibit they plan to use:

I. Purpose

What does the exhibit intend to accomplish? Why was the exhibit developed? What determined the nature and scope of the exhibit?

II. Organization

What is the organizing principle of the exhibit?

Organizing principles include:

- A. aesthetic
- B. didactic (intended for instruction)
 - 1. conceptual (pertaining to the forming of general notions)
 - 2. thematic
 - 3. taxonomic (classification)
 - 4. chronological
- C. curiosity arousing

III. Method

Is the choice of objects in terms of kind and number appropriate to the chosen theme? Does the exhibit depend largely on primary or secondary sources?

IV. Educational Aspects

To what kind of audience is the exhibit directed? Is it appropriate for the class? How much additional information must be supplied to place it within the context of coursework?

V. Scholarship

What kinds of research and investigation went into the development of the exhibit? Is the research adequate? Is the information correct? Is there a particular bias?⁸

When evaluating exhibits, remember that the first resources of museums are objects. The strongest, most forthright method of museum presentation is the exhibition of objects without too much audio-visual and other distracting media. An exhibit needs objects of interest to ensure its effectiveness.⁹ Nevertheless, the best exhibits have good labels that give "voice" to the objects so that they may tell their own story. Effective exhibits have a main label, a secondary label, explanatory labels, and captions. The main label states the thesis of the exhibit. The secondary label outlines the theme with a logical sequence of ideas. Explanatory labels develop those ideas with unified paragraphs, and captions use sentences to fill in specifics.¹⁰ Labels, when carefully produced, encourage interest and do not detract from the objects. Labels are not intended to teach; they act as an introduction and should stimulate further study. But a label with too little information is worse than one that is too long.¹¹

Good exhibits use labels and a large number of artifacts. Most museums, however, possess more objects than they can exhibit. To see these items, the teacher must contact museum staff to make plans to see storage areas. When visiting collections storage areas, the teacher can identify additional items relevant to the class and arrange for students to see them. Viewing the collections with the staff also gives the teacher a chance to discuss what kind of presentation will be most beneficial for the class. It is usually better to ask the director or curators to make presentations rather than depending on volunteer tour guides who may not be prepared to provide the information students want.¹² The teacher may wish to make the presentation, and this is the best way to place objects and exhibits within the context of previous lectures and discussions.

When giving a presentation, the teacher should be aware that a museum contains many objects that constitute, by their arrangement, a special kind of space that differs from the classroom. Space acts as time in a museum; space integrates all of the elements of exhibits; space, not a syllabus or course description, is the most pervasive structure in the museum system. The teacher must work within this space and become a guide through it to help the class focus on themes and objects. The teacher, in this way, establishes "ownership" of the objects and themes and thereby is in a position to share them.¹³ The special environment of the museum provides a structure for inquiry that allows the teacher to present themes in a predetermined order. When doing so, the teacher should point out important

associations, request the reading of labels, provide immediate feedback, and give the class any necessary additional information.¹⁴ Direct teacher involvement compels the reconsideration of hasty conclusions and facile thinking. Students should be encouraged, however, to interpret what they see on their own.¹⁵

Museums collect many kinds of objects that will interest students. Some objects, such as the Wright Brothers' plane, are intrinsically important. Others are examples of everyday objects that are used in teaching and research. Museums acquire objects by field collecting, gift, loan, and exchange in accordance with established procedures. These procedures are dictated by legal, ethical, and practical concerns and are outlined in the institution's collections policy. One of the most important considerations in museum collecting is a clear definition of the scope of what should be collected. The definition sets limitations to collections. It specifies the place, time, and subjects to which the collections must relate.¹⁶ Knowing the institution's scope of collections will help the teacher understand how the collections can be used.

All objects in museums require constant care. No objects will last forever, but museums go to great lengths to protect their collections in ways that enable them to endure for centuries. Good conservation practices include vigilant security, stringent housekeeping, proper control of lighting and relative humidity, sophisticated repair and rehabilitation techniques, and regulated use.¹⁷ Teachers should be aware that most objects in a museum collection can only be handled by museum staff and that loaning such items for classroom use is considered unthinkable. But, although most objects in a museum's collection are considered sacrosanct, museums gladly loan selected objects to other institutions and to teachers. When used with discretion and reason, these objects improve classroom participation and give students a different perspective on the past.¹⁸

Sophisticated knowledge of how to analyze and interpret objects is not required if the instructor intends to use objects only as another form of media to illustrate lectures. The teacher interested in using objects in more effective ways should study the appropriate literature. Of particular help to those looking for a good introduction to the fundamental principles of object study is Craig Gilborn's article "Pop Pedagogy."¹⁹ Gilborn examines the coke bottle as a "classic" artifact well-suited for an introductory exercise in the study of objects. Other articles and books that will help beginners introduce themselves to the study of objects have been written by Cary Carson, James Deetz, F. McClung Fleming, James Gardener, Henry Glassie, and Thomas Schlereth.²⁰ In addition, articles on methods for using artifacts in the classroom appear regularly in History News, published by the American Association for State and Local History, which also sells technical leaflets and slide-tape packages on artifact study.²¹

Although these materials will give an overview of object study, the teacher who wishes to introduce students to objects as important scholarly sources should enlist the aid of a working museum professional. When doing so be sure and find out the person's methodological orientation. Some museum people have a connoisseur's orientation. The methodology of connoisseurship involves the consideration of form, color, ornamentation, materials, construction, function, style, date, attribution, condition, and associations.²² Connoisseurship addresses the artifact and not the world of which it was once a part. Other museum professionals, although well-versed in the methods of connoisseurship, also study artifacts to learn the values,

ideas, and assumptions of a particular community or society. James Deetz has explained the importance of this approach, called material culture study, to history and to history museums:

The study of material culture--all the ways we have shaped our environment according to a set rule of culturally shaped plans--has long been considered a mere footnote to "true" history or as a pursuit better left to collectors and dilettantes. In recent years, however, material culture studies have made dramatic advances in academic respectability. Research and publication by such scholars as Henry Glassie, Thomas Schlereth, John Vlach, Robert St. George and many others have shown that objects have been a little appreciated but important source for a wider and more dramatic perspective on American life. With the arrival of material culture studies as a sophisticated addition to the study of history, we are now witnessing the emergence of a research community within the larger community of history museums.²³

The members of this emerging research community in material culture are interested in artifact study as a key to a more democratic history. They hope to achieve a historical perspective on the everyday lives of ordinary people who, although dominant numerically, left little or no written records.²⁴ Students can learn a great deal about artifact study from lectures given by such experts in the classroom. They can also learn how to use objects in their research and writing by undertaking projects under the supervision of a museum professional. A museum project should be regarded just as any other class project. But the teacher must work directly with the supervising museum person and together develop a working mechanism for evaluating the project. A good museum project is one that teaches students something about how to use and handle objects and that exposes them to a broad range of museum functions.

The two museum functions that offer the best opportunities for student projects are research and education. Museums conduct three kinds of research: summative, applied, and basic. Summative research is the pulling together of previously documented information on a subject. The application of research findings in order to develop a product is applied research. Few museums in the United States conduct applied research. Basic research stresses original scholarship. Museums with a basic research component have as a primary goal the production and publication of new knowledge. Most students undertake summative research in museums. Advanced students, however, should be encouraged to attempt basic research and to publish.²⁵

The chief claim for the importance of museums as educational institutions lies in the objects they collect and protect. Museum education is referred to as "interpretation," that is, teaching with objects. Interpretive teaching allows visitors to experience objects with their senses. By touching, hearing, using, and smelling objects, museum-goers learn about them and the people who made and used them in a manner that complements what they read in label texts. This kind of teaching is more than mere sensory gratification. Since psychologists have discovered that some people are "object-minded" but not "word-minded," it is of practical importance. The necessity of meeting the needs of the object-minded has been addressed by S. Dillon Ripley of the Smithsonian Institution:

We assume today that one can read about objects. They can be illustrated in books. It is not, therefore, necessary to touch them. One doesn't have to savor tactilely the texture of objects,

to read them manually, to hear records of the sounds of the audible world, to be an educated person, granted that diploma. And yet many people are not really born only to be literate. Many people are born with their talent to be illiterate, to read with their hands, to read with their ears, to develop a comprehensive talent for living only with the whole of their senses. Many highly creative people, as we all know, are much less interested in reading than "norms" or levels of education set down by the departments of education would have us believe . . .²⁶

Students who complete education projects in museums can use what they learn about interpretation in their own teaching careers.

Interpretive educational programs are one way museums reach diverse audiences. Museums also serve constituents by acting as community centers. Museums sponsor concerts, plays, motion picture festivals, craft shows, and other performing arts and community programs. They provide facilities and meeting places for clubs and other organized groups, send lecturers on circuit, circulate traveling exhibits, and develop exhibits for shopping malls and airports. Museum professionals do not all agree that this is a good trend for museums. While some view such activities as good public relations, others consider them unnecessary events that divert funds and energies from quality research and exhibitions.²⁷ Another criticism of museums as community centers is that they seldom include the poor and underprivileged. Many museums have met this criticism by developing outreach programs in ghetto neighborhoods and mounting exhibits on, for example, ethnicity, minority achievements, drug abuse, and rats.²⁸ Nevertheless, museums have a poor record as agents of social change.²⁹

One important way museums function as community centers is by collaborating with colleges and universities to develop programs and classes. Collaborations between museums and colleges are unique and exciting ways to share knowledge and learn new techniques. Collaboration in exhibit development, for example, offers opportunities for students to learn fundamentals of exhibit design and how to handle artifacts. Such collaborations also challenge teachers to think about how they can present information in a form other than publications and lectures. Museum-college collaboration can also extend to sharing facilities. Although difficult to arrange and somewhat unwieldy to administer, shared facilities such as slide libraries have proven beneficial to several museums and colleges. Museums and colleges have also collaborated on research projects in history, education, the study of visitor behavior, and the sociology of museums.³⁰

The richest area for museum-college partnership has been collaborative educational programming. Museums and colleges have been very successful in developing entry-level museum studies programs and midcareer courses for museum professionals. There are also examples of outstanding programs that reach broader audiences. Collaborative educational programming, like collaborative exhibit development, challenges the traditional ways museum professionals and professors think and presents an opportunity to share knowledge and techniques. But, like sharing facilities, collaborative educational programming can be burdensome. When planning a collaborative educational program, instructors should consider these three questions along with the other, more routine questions involved in designing a course:

1. Where and when will the course be offered?
2. Where will the project administrative center be located?

3. How much of the instructors' salaries will be paid by each institution?³¹

Museums can provide many resources for teachers. Teachers must understand how museums function, however. The traditional museum visit can be enhanced if teachers prepare in advance. Objects borrowed from museums can be used to convey a unique "sense of the past." Projects in museums introduce both teachers and students to material culture studies and to how museums and museum professionals function. Collaborations between colleges and museums serve both institutions in ways that provide opportunities for learning and increased understanding.

NOTES

¹Quoted in Edward P. Alexander, Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Function of Museums (Nashville, Tennessee, 1979), 5.

²Barbara H. Butler and Adrienne L. Horn, "A Meeting of the Minds: Museums and Universities," Museum News, 26 (August 1983), 42-43.

³Commission on the Humanities, The Humanities in American Life, (Berkeley, California, 1983), 42-44.

⁴American Association of Museums (hereafter "AAM"), Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards (Washington, 1973), 8-9.

⁵Sandra L. Myres, "The Use of Three-Dimensional Objects in the Teaching of History," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, 5 (Fall 1980), 130.

⁶Alexander, Museums in Motion, 173-192.

⁷E. McClung Fleming, "The Period Room as a Curatorial Publication," Museum News, 50 (June 1972), 39-43.

⁸Exhibits are subject to as many biases as any intellectual pursuit. Students should be encouraged to consider the exhibit's "point of view."

⁹Although sophisticated electronic devices and costly, "slick" designs can be fun and striking, an exhibit will fail without interesting artifacts and a solid text.

¹⁰Don W. Wilson and Dennis Medina, "Exhibit Labels: A Consideration of Content," American Association for State and Local History (hereafter "AASLH") Technical Leaflet 60 (Nashville, Tennessee, 1962).

¹¹G. Werner, "Why Johnny Can't Read Labels," Curator, 6 (1963), 143-156.

¹²Myres, "The Use of Three-Dimensional Objects in the Teaching of History," 130.

¹³M. A. Ramsey, "Space for Learning," Museum News, 52 (March 1974), 50.

¹⁴Student/teacher interaction is vital. Too often, teachers, even at the college level, abandon their students in exhibit halls to fare for themselves. Nothing could be more irresponsible.

¹⁵Museums provide the teacher with an excellent opportunity to show students how much of our knowledge about the past is derived from the present; museums can present the possibility of challenging conventional conclusions. Students should be encouraged to criticize the exhibits from their own point of view. See Mark P. Leone, "Method as Message: Interpreting the Past with the Public," Museum News, 62 (October 1983), 34-39.

¹⁶Ralph H. Lewis, Handbook of Museum Technology (New York, 1982), 4-5.

¹⁷See Per E. Guldbeck with Bruce A. McLeish, The Care of Antiques and Historical Collections, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tennessee, 1985).

¹⁸Myres, "The Use of Three-Dimensional Objects in the Teaching of History," 129.

¹⁹Craig Gilborn, "Pop Pedagogy," Museum News, 47 (December 1968), 12-18. Also in Thomas J. Schlereth, Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville, Tennessee, 1982), 183-194.

²⁰Ian A. Quimby, ed., Material Culture Study in American Life (New York: 1978); James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life (Garden City, New York, 1977); E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," Winterthur Portfolio, 9 (1974), 153-174; James B. Gardener and George Rollie Adams, eds., Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History (Nashville, Tennessee, 1983); Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia, 1968); Thomas J. Schlereth, Artifacts and the American Past (Nashville, 1980); Thomas J. Schlereth, Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville, 1982).

²¹For information on titles and prices write the American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Avenue North, Suite 102, Nashville, Tennessee, 37201.

²²Charles F. Montgomery, "Some Remarks on the Science and Principles on Connoisseurship," Walpole Society Notebook (1961), 7-20.

²³James Deetz, "The Artifact and Its Content," Museum News, 62 (October 1983), 25.

²⁴Thomas J. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies and Social History Research," Journal of Social History (Summer 1983), 112-113.

²⁵Lorin I. Nevling, Jr., "On Public Understanding of Museum Research," Curator, 27 (September 1984), 189-193.

²⁶Quoted in AAM, America's Museums: The Belmont Report (Washington, 1969), 9.

²⁷Ibid., 21.

²⁸Alexander, Museums in Motion, 215.

²⁹See Thomas D. Nicholson, "More Damn Trouble," Museum News, 63 (October 1984), 28-35.

³⁰Butler and Horn, "A Meeting of Minds," 42.

³¹Diane Stillman, Barbara H. Butler, Carol Yukelich, "A Focus on the Interdisciplinary Curriculum," Museum News, 61 (August 1983), 48-51.