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Finding Balance in Object-Based Museum Narratives

Objects act as containers for material culture: through their aura they convey historical meaning and evoke response. A well-crafted museum exhibit arranges a series of objects to tell a story through context and example. Although museum visitors can attest to the importance of objects in shaping their experience, the underlying mechanisms can be difficult to articulate. How do objects convey meaning? Moreover, how can exhibit designers craft effective narratives using objects?

Museum visitors place a seemingly inordinate amount of trust in the validity of objects as material evidence of the past. As David Thelen discovered in surveying Americans on their relationship to history, visitors find museums to be their most trustworthy connection to the past (21). Even Henry Ford, who famously admonished that “history is more or less bunk,” subsequently found truth in material culture through building Greenfield Village (Conn, 156). As Steven Conn observes, “the principle of [Ford’s] historical enterprise was that objects more powerfully conveyed historical meaning than words” (154). Conn’s model of object-based epistemology, while largely abandoned by academic historians, has maintained its currency with museum visitors who view artifacts as the ultimate primary sources of historical evidence.

The power of objects resides in their aura—the amalgam of resonance and wonder, context and subtext that transmits historic meaning and value. Resonance, as described by Stephen Greenblatt, brings contextual relationships to the fore, while wonder evokes an arresting subtext of uniqueness (42). Using the expansive definition of “objectness” offered by Elaine Gurian, historical objects need not be rigidly tangible or real (36). These characteristics and their meaning exist external to the object; they are

dependent on the observer's perspective. For example, the Confederate flag could resonate alternatively as a symbol of racial oppression or states' rights depending on one's viewpoint. A multitude of perspectives yields numerous interpretations of objects, especially in contested arenas.

Museum curators need to consider the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations that visitors will bring to the exhibit. While in the past, museums used objects to tell a fixed narrative based on a claim to objective truth, modern exhibits should allow for ambiguity and contingency in order to better engage visitors. James Gardner argues that museums should find the appropriate balance of shared authority, which can be accomplished by making the process of history explicit (19). Giving visitors access to history's disciplinary toolkit, as described by Robert Bain and Kirsten Ellenbogen, can help to develop a learner-centric pedagogy that can teach visitors to use objects to "rethink past thoughts" (162). By divesting a portion of their critical authority and posing questions in addition to answers, museum curators can engage visitors on a deeper level.

Once museum professionals acknowledge the importance of objects in eliciting a range of responses that can be channeled through critical historical interpretation, the question remains: what methods can be employed to engage visitors with material culture and historical objects? Taking into account the ways through which they interact with objects and their trust in material evidence, museum curators can invite visitors into the historic process by modeling methods then posing open-ended questions. This provides both the disciplinary toolkit and the space to implement the process of critical analysis. For example, an exhibit could present some historic context for a farming implement, pose a possible way that it could have been used based on the background information (with an outline of the historian's process of analysis), and then ask the visitor to hypothesize how else it could have been used. Such an exercise would have to balance succinctness with the appropriate level of detail—giving

the visitor enough information to make an educated hypothesis without leading to a singular answer or drowning the voice of the object.

However, a single artifact can only tell a snippet of a broader historical narrative. Museum curators need to assist visitors in weaving individual items into a storypath. Richard Rabinowitz, while advocating for a more rigid grasp on critical authority, offers a number of compelling methods for using objects to deliver a historical narrative. Through episodic storytelling underpinned with a hierarchical structure of text, Rabinowitz crafted a narrative on slavery in New York City from a relative scarcity of relevant objects. This hierarchy of information assists visitors in comprehending the resonance of the larger narrative while drilling down to individual examples that evoke wonder. His use of video dialogue to allow visitors to eavesdrop on history channels Gurian's expansive definition of objectness to arrive at Bain and Ellenbogen's goal of "rethinking past thoughts" through the use of technology.

In using objects to construct a narrative, museum curators should be careful to not lose sight of the story they are telling. Should exhibits center on objects or the people who created, used, and discarded the materials? Garder emphasizes the "population of the past" with real people with agency, as opposed to "anonymous aggregates" (16). Through the use of objects to tell the story of human history, we may be able to accomplish Michael Wallace's declaration for museums to "assist people to become historically informed makers of history" (161). That being said, museum curators cannot simply tell the story of triumph and accomplishment, they must also depict failure and powerlessness. In order to craft a realistic model of the past, a dialectical balance must be struck between objects and people, success and failure.

In an era increasingly defined by digital and virtual interactions, objects can serve to anchor our understanding of the past in tangible forms. When used correctly, objects have the potential to reach

beyond their material forms and become synecdoches for larger cultural forces. However, exhibits that rely too heavily on objects risk fetishizing artifacts and losing sight of historical actors. Similarly, authority should be shared equitably—if not equally—between curator and visitor in order to foster a sense of efficacy in the historical process. A careful balance needs to be struck between these opposing forces surrounding objects, which can be secured through awareness and appreciation for the function of objects in influencing visitors' reactions. The reward for achieving this balance is an engaged and critical audience.