Rethinking the Role of Museum Collections

Trevor Jones
activecollections.org

Active Collections

Rethinking the Role of Museum Collections

Nebraska Museums Association Conference
April 4, 2017
Distribution of Museums by Discipline, FY 2014

- Arboretums, Botanical Gardens, & Nature Centers: 2.4%
- Art Museums: 4.5%
- Children's Museums: 1.0%
- Historical Societies, Historic Preservation, & Historic Houses and Sites: 48.0%
- History Museums: 7.5%
- Unclassified and General Museums: 33.1%
- Natural History & Natural Science Museums: 0.9%
- Science & Technology Museums & Planetariums: 1.1%
- Zoos, Aquariums, & Wildlife Conservation: 1.4%

Source: Museum Universe Data File, FY 2014 Q3, Institute of Museum and Library Services
American museums, libraries, archives, historical societies, and scientific research organizations are visited 2.5 billion times a year. Their collections teach and inspire and are vital to sustaining a well-educated and connected citizenry, a thriving tourist industry, and a wealth of knowledge to enrich and enlighten our civilization. They are a public trust that must be protected for future generations.

The Heritage Health Index found that artifacts in America’s collections are at risk and require immediate attention and care, including: 4.7 million works of art, 13.5 million historic objects—from flags and quilts to Presidential china and Pueblo pottery, 153 million photographs, 189 million natural science specimens, 270 million rare and unique books, periodicals, and scrapbooks.

Providing a safe environment and proper care for collections is a fundamental responsibility of all institutions and individuals who care about our heritage. These collections can survive the twenty-first century and continue to enrich the lives of Americans if action is taken now:

- Institutions must give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust.
- Every collecting institution must develop an emergency plan to protect its collections.
- Every institution must assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff.
- Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector must assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive.
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Let’s talk about Impact
DROWNING IN THE SEA OF YOUR CHAOTIC COLLECTION? WE CAN... HELP!

www.activecollections.org
A MANIFESTO FOR ACTIVE HISTORY MUSEUM COLLECTIONS
by Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale

Millions of artifacts in museum collections across the country are not actively supporting the institutions that steward them. Museums of all types are experiencing this problem, but it is particularly entrenched in history museums. Most history museums possess thousands of poorly maintained, inadequately cataloged, and underutilized artifacts. Instead of being active assets, these lazy artifacts drain vital
“If we do not have the right objects to tell meaningful human stories, we should clear out our storerooms and start again or abandon artifact-based interpretation entirely.”

— TREVOR JONES
Kentucky Historical Society

(1846), the Minnesota Historical Society (1849), the Chicago Historical Society (1856), the Missouri Historical Society (1866), and The Filson Club (1884) were among the earliest members of the Association. The mere suggestion that they divest themselves of anything that had found its way to their storerooms would have been anathema.

Second, few if any of these founders would have grasped what Jones meant when invoking “artifact-based interpretation” as an institutional goal. Library and archival materials constituted the core of most of their collections, but artifacts had also found their way into these institutions, usually in a rather haphazard fashion. To the extent that their institutions exhibited three-dimensional materials at all, they did so in case-bound displays that were, in the words of one astute observer, “an odd mixture of artifacts, each claiming to be the first this and the earliest that, or the particular thing used by some famous personage in some famous exploit.”

Historical societies, he continued, “offered not so much a historical experience ... as an escape from history altogether by leaping into oddity so bizarre that it denied interpretation of any sort.”

While first efforts at artifact-intensive interpretive exhibitions...
ACTIVE COLLECTIONS

FIELD-WIDE SURVEY

WWW.ACTIVECOLLECTIONS.ORG
$190 to acquire
$16.50/sq. ft. to store
Are your artifacts lazy?
Tier your Collections!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 1</th>
<th>Tier 2</th>
<th>Tier 3</th>
<th>Tier 4</th>
<th>Tier 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant to Kentucky AND nationally or internationally significant</td>
<td>Significant historical value to Kentucky; strong provenance</td>
<td>Historical value to a location in Kentucky; limited provenance</td>
<td>Historical value to other locations; no Kentucky connection</td>
<td>Limited or no historical value; limited or no provenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few, if any, duplicates in this or other collections and/or of high monetary value</td>
<td>Few similar examples in this or other collections</td>
<td>Similar examples are held in this or other collections</td>
<td>Common in this or other collections</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rare, likely irreplaceable</td>
<td>Uncommon and difficult to replace</td>
<td>Moderately difficult to replace</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could be used to tell multiple powerful stories about Kentucky and its place in the nation</td>
<td>Could be used to tell multiple powerful stories about the state</td>
<td>Plays a supporting role in telling stories about the state</td>
<td>May play a supporting role or illustrate a concept, but is not the focus</td>
<td>Plays a minor role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: Portraits of Dennis and Diademia Doram</td>
<td>Example: The coat Governor William Goebel was wearing when he was fatally shot</td>
<td>Example: Copper still</td>
<td>Example: Flapper dress</td>
<td>Example: Woodworking planes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
KEEP CALM AND STOP BLEEDING
48-Star Flag Images
Proposed Deaccession
7.21.15

1987.81.140 (KMHM)

1987.81.186 (KMHM)

1987.81.218 (unknown)

1987.81.230 (unknown) 1987.81.250 (KMHM)

1987.81.258 (KMHM)
Collections should be held in perpetuity

“Acquisitions are made in the expectation that they will be preserved in perpetuity. Museum governing bodies must act as guardians of the long-term public interest in the collection.”

Ethical Guidelines -- Museums Association, UK
What if there were planned expiration dates for most collections?
I'm so angry I could vote.
45% have never deaccessioned or only conduct every few years.

Type of inventory conducted in the last five years:

- No inventory
- Partial inventory
- Full inventory

Number of institutions:

- No inventory: 0
- Partial inventory: 150
- Full inventory: 50
WHAT MATTERS?

- MAY NEED OBJECT IN THE FUTURE
- MAY FIND IT IMPORTANT LATER ON

- DON'T KNOW THE COLLECTION
- CAN'T BEAR TO DX
- UPSET SOMEONE

- UPSET SOMEONE
- DO SOMETHING UNETHICAL
- DON'T KNOW THE COLLECTION
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- May find it was important later on

**DON’T KNOW THE COLLECTION**
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- Upset someone

**UPSET SOMEONE**
- Do something unethical
- Don’t know the collection
"Stuff is intensely, not to say compulsively, readable." — Tracey Kidder

STUFF

COMPULSIVE HOARDING AND THE MEANING OF THINGS

Randy O. Frost & Gail Steketee
## Hoarders and Museum Workers

Table 4: Parallels between People who Hoard and Museum Workers

- Both think every object is special and cannot pass up free objects, even if not needed.
- Both are unconcerned about having too many objects and share a goal of no loss of items.
- Objects induce positive emotions similar to the experience of an emotional high in both.
- Both experience emotional distress about object loss and experience impairment because of this. The distress stops museums from engaging in other activities because the overly large collection requires too much attention.
- Both believe “We might need it some day” and see opportunities in objects, sometimes with creative ideas about possible uses.
- Both assign meaning and identity to objects, varying only in individual identity vs museum mission. Both have stories about everything they own.
- **Both underestimate their memory capacity. People who hoard fear they can’t remember without seeing the triggering object. Museum staff believe their collections represent society’s collective memory, fearing that without them, society would forget the history.**
- Both believe objects stand in for people as if objects are permanent whereas people are not.
- Both people who hoard and museum staff seek to avoid waste, wanting to keep their objects out of the landfill.
- Both have limited awareness (insight) of their situation, believing their behavior is normal and reasonable, despite the distress and impairment.
- Both experience fear of making mistakes, of being irresponsible, and a desire for completeness of their accumulated items.
- Both avoid letting go of their stuff, making excuses to retain items.
- Both try to exert control over objects – “This stuff is mine, don’t touch it!”.
Nine Effective Practices For Building Audiences

1. Recognize When Change Is Needed
2. Identify Target Audience that Fits
3. Determine What Kind of Barriers to Remove
4. Take Out the Guesswork
5. Think Through the Relationship
6. Provide Multiple Ways In
7. Align Organization Around Strategy
8. Build in Learning
9. Prepare for Success
IS YOUR COLLECTION HOLDING YOU HOSTAGE?

www.activecollections.org