

*History-making in the Museum: Toward Nurturing Public
Historical Practice*

Trina Cooper-Bolam

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History-making In The Museum: Toward Nurturing Public Historical Practice

ABSTRACT

In accordance with recent changes to the *Museums Act* through Bill C-49, the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), soon to be the Canadian Museum of History, has initiated a process to change its Canada Hall to better “present the national history of Canada and its people” (CMC 2013). In order to inform a discussion of how Canadians’ knowledge of history can be enhanced in the museum setting, the questions: “how do museum visitors optimally learn about and use history?” and, “how can this knowledge be used to design interaction models to best support the historical practice of visitors in the exhibition space?” must be answered. *History-making in the Museum: Toward Nurturing Public Historical Practice* demonstrates that in placing emphasis on visitor experience, and acknowledging visitor motivations and historical practice as a larger process that occurs both within and without the exhibition space, museums, like CMC, can consider interaction models that engage with visitors in ways that are meaningful to them and that inform and advance their historical practice, thereby closing the discursive gap between how the history and heritage profession understands and represents history and how visitors interpret and use it in their daily lives.

KEYWORDS

Canada; Museum; Exhibition; History

It is 2013, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) has concluded a series of public consultations in nine cities across Canada and closed an online survey designed to solicit from Canadians their opinions on “the themes, personalities, events and milestones that tell the Canadian story, and...the objects that they would include in the new Canadian Museum of History” (CMC 2013). While the motivations on the part of the Harper Government to change the purpose of this state museum through the introduction of Bill C-49, *Canadian Museum of History Act*, remain opaque, and the subject of much public conjecture, CMC has communicated their intention to change the Canada [history] Hall to better “present the national history of Canada and its people” (CMC 2013). As heritage institutions across Canada prepare for the upcoming sesquicentennial anniversary of Confederation, so too is CMC. The following discussion has arisen out of speculation as to how CMC staff might best approach the development of the Canada Hall and the new Confederation exhibition to align with the institution’s new purpose “...to enhance Canadians’ knowledge, understanding and appreciation of events, experiences, people and objects that reflect and have shaped Canada’s history and identity, and also to enhance their awareness of world history and cultures” (Bill C-49). In order to inform a discussion of promising practices in exhibition design that may be applied to the task of enhancing Canadians’ knowledge of history, the questions: “how do museum visitors optimally learn about and use history?”, and “how can this knowledge be used to design interaction models

to best support the historical practice of visitors in the exhibition space?" need to be answered. For the purposes of this discussion, an interaction model is defined as the mechanism through which the museum interacts with its audience, encompassing the totality and interplay of the systems and processes (curatorial, interpretative, educative, design) museums engage in exhibition development.

This discussion will demonstrate that in placing emphasis on visitor experience, and acknowledging visitor motivations and historical practice as a larger process that occurs both within and without the exhibition space, museums, like CMC, can consider interaction models that engage with visitors in ways that are meaningful to them and that inform and advance their historical practice, thereby closing the discursive gap between how the history and heritage profession understands and represents history and how visitors interpret and use it in their daily lives. Works that inform this study include a brief review of recent discourse on shared authority and content creation within the museum context, critical findings from landmark Canadian and American surveys on public historical practice, and identity-related motivations of museum visitors, as well as considerations of the discursive gap and the educative limitations of the exhibition space as a leisure/free-learning environment. From there, the requirements of an interaction model that prioritizes the history-making process of the visitor will be presented.

New roles and aspirations for history museums in society will be posited, as will implications for the emerging work of CMC. This includes the potential for research and evaluation to validate emerging interaction models, providing greater insight into the means by which museums can foster a participatory historical culture.

Authority and the Museum

According to the former President of CMC, Victor Rabinovich, as described in his *View from the President's Chair*, 2008, museums are a place to store objects that exemplify wealth, skill, and beauty (Rabinovich 342), a possessor and distributor of knowledge (Rabinovich 343), a destination for the tourism experience (Rabinovich 343), and a focal point for national pride and identity (Rabinovich 344). Overtones of his thinking with regard to national identity and the touristic experience appear to be holdovers from his predecessor, former CMC president George MacDonald, who believed that “one way in which CMC makes itself meaningful is that, as a shrine containing national treasures it can be seen by Canadians as an appropriate pilgrimage destination where their experience of natural cultural/identity will help transform them into ‘good citizens’ (Alsford and MacDonald, 1989:59).

Indeed, these perspectives were consistent with ideologies that propelled a shift that occurred in the 1980s “...from publicly supported cultural repository to marketing-oriented private sector entertainment /tourism industry” (Neilson 26). What specifically then, was the CMC and other museums of its era marketing? Neilson in *The Development of Marketing in the Canadian Museum Community, 1840-1989*, suggests that the focus of Canadian museums was, and remains, marketing the idea of the sovereign nation, the “imagined community” of Canada (Neilson 18). Moreover Neilson considered museums “...purveyors of ideology and of a downward spread of knowledge to the public” (qtd. in Neilson 19) forming an integral part of a federal cultural apparatus designed to reinforce sovereignty by inculcating a prescribed national history and identity.

Clearly, constructing and authorizing historical and cultural representations was regarded as not only the sole purview, but also as the central obligation of federal museums. Although the 1970s and 1980s also heralded the beginning of an orientation to visitors, the touristic experience rather than the historical practice of visitors, dominated museum discourse and practice.

The combination of the concentration of power in the museum and the focus on employing the techniques of tourism and marketing to attract and entertain visitors, contributed to the perception that museum visitors' interest and capacity to learn about history had somehow atrophied. While Saturday morning lecture audiences crammed into the Victoria Memorial Museum building to learn about natural history in 1920, recent and prevalent museum interpretation practices focus on distilling complex concepts to short texts in plain language prioritizing recognition and recall of an individual 'message' over learning in an effort to prevent visitor fatigue. The combination of an entrenched institutional stranglehold on authority, and marketing approaches that reduce learning opportunities to touristic experiences, has not served Canadians well.

More recently, scholars from among the cultural heritage sector have considered the benefits of shared authority. Citing Barbara Misztal, Graham Black, in *Museums, Memory and History*, states "...museums have begun to see their role change from the collection and presentation of a single authorized past to that of cultural mediator, incorporating and representing the memories of previously marginalized groups" (Misztal 20)(Black 422). In *Towards A Participatory Historical Culture: Some Personal Thoughts*, Margaret Conrad reflects on the "history wars" that have "erupted in Canada and elsewhere in recent years" (Conrad 66). Indeed, a 'new museology',

wherein the sharing of the authority of representation between museums and the groups represented became a new standard of museum practice, emerged in Canada, in part, in response to controversy surrounding the exhibitions *The Spirit Sings* (1988) and *Into The Heart of Africa* (1989-1990). Ruth Phillips, one of the significant contributors to the shift to the new museology, invites historians to “consider the museum as the site of historical practice in the context of responsible research and representation” (Phillips 87). Although her invitation is well positioned, the visiting public remains external to the proposed paradigm. Conrad argues that “rather than constitute an impediment to historical understanding, controversies about the past can be viewed as opportunities to navigate the complexities of historical events, fostering a deeper understanding of historical processes by all parties” (Conrad 66). She cites Michael Frisch on *Sharing Authority*, crediting the collection of essays with having made an enormous impact in changing the way that museums construct and represent history (Frisch)(Conrad 67).

For the most part, the move to embrace a multiplicity of narratives, share authority with represented groups, and include narratives of previously marginalized groups, has excluded the visitor as a content-contributor. Although sharing authority mitigates contested heritage interpretation, the process of selection and representation privileges the values of the institution and the select groups consulted.

According to Garth Allen and Caroline Anson in *The Role of the Museum in Creating Multi-Cultural Identities*, museums, rather, should act as “enablers for cultural empowerment” in the way in which they interact with communities *and* visiting public (Allen, Anson 129). Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, a study that presents the findings of a national survey on Americans’ uses of history and respondents regarded “historymaking as a more democratic activity that allows amateurs and professionals to learn from each other” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 167). Moreover, quoting Frisch, “the audience’s “authority” he notes, may be “grounded in culture and experience rather than academic expertise.” But “this authority can become central to an exhibit’s capacity to provide a meaningful engagement with history” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 167). The idea of sharing authority over content and representation, not only with communities and groups, but also with the visiting public, suggests a relinquishing of power that might appear unpalatable to many, if not most, museum professionals. Their concerns, already well documented in relation to sharing power with communities, might intensify in relation to the general public, about whom according to Beverly Serrell, author of oft-used educational text, *Exhibit Labels and Interpretive Approach*, asks of emerging museum practitioners, "Have they ever closely watched visitors in their galleries and seen how hard they try to understand what is going on, and how they typically underutilize what is there?" (Serrell 44).

Apprehensions aside, if museums are to consider the logic of democratization of historymaking, the potential gains must be first assessed, requiring an understanding of historical practice among the visiting public. Also, if the museum is to become a site of historical practice where shared authority extends to the public, the public must learn to think like historians.

The Visitor and Historymaker

According to Rosenzweig and Thelan, “the foundations for a more participatory historical culture already exist” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 177). Historical practice on the part of the individual involves many of the same processes as that of the historian, albeit the motivations are often different and highly personal. In a similar Canadian study, *Canadians and their Pasts*, the construction and reconstruction of autobiographical memory was found to be a fundamental aspect of one’s uses of the past (Friesen, Muise, Northrup 221). For scholars like John Falk, Jay Rounds, and B. Trofanenko, personal and autobiographical motivations are rooted in identity and identity work. For Thelan, “using the past is as natural a part of life as eating or breathing...we employ the past to make sense of the present and to influence the future” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 176).

The major findings from the U.S. survey that speak to common historical practice among the public, include using history to educate and communicate continuity and historical context to their children (Rosenzweig, Thelan 177), to understand, relate, empathize, and create connections with the experiences of ‘others’ and also to understand of ‘others’, “how their culture affects how they act and live here today... as a first step toward respecting, engaging, and even embracing unfamiliar people, practices, and faiths” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 178). Other significant findings include the desire to convey a sense of responsibility to younger generations, to communicate the struggle, sacrifice, and resistance of their ancestors, to identify past mistakes and prevent them from recurring (Rosenzweig, Thelan 179), to feel connected to the past and each other, and simply for the love of history – to make sense of the world (Rosenzweig, Thelan 179).

It is apparent from the responses of the majority of survey respondents that historical practice performs the important function of fostering respect, tolerance and appreciation, creates a sense of connection and relatedness, contributes to social cohesion, develops morality and ethical intelligence, and nurtures the growth and development of identity. Further substantiated by findings from *Canadians and their Pasts*, researchers note “as the surveys conducted elsewhere revealed, ordinary people are drawing upon history to establish identity, morality, immortality, and agency” (Conrad, Northrup, Pollard 3).

In Canada, cultivating “limited identities”, defined as minority and alternative group identities, proved a significant element of historical practice. Despite the major finding that the construction and ongoing negotiation of autobiographical remembering is a fundamental aspect of how Canadians use their pasts, the study also found that “collective remembering of the country itself is much more common than...[was] expected” (Friesen, Muise, Northrup 238). Although the findings of the Canadian study diverged from the similar U.S. study, both affirm the positive benefits of participatory historical culture and suggest that robust historical practice can contribute to constructing and maintaining healthy societies.

Importantly, and of note to museum professionals, “respondents [from the U.S. study] said they wanted a culture in which individuals took responsibility and acquired skills to interpret history for themselves” (Rosenzweig, Thelan 180). Cary Carson in *The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?* asserts “modern visitors are not content to be passive spectators” (Carson 17). He stresses that museum visitors want to be able to relate to history; particularly to the ordinary people they meet. They want to join in the action of the story, be transported back to another time and place in their imaginations. He stresses the value of creating the opportunity to provide visitors with a historical identity (Carson 21).

Similarly, Jay Rounds in *Doing Identity Work in Museums*, posits that “in creating immersive experiences, museums afford visitors the opportunity to use the exhibit experience as a way of vicariously trying on a different identity, to see how it feels” and to consider “what would I have been like if I had lived there and/or then?”(Rounds 146). For B. Trofanenko in *Interrupting the Gaze: On Reconsidering Authority in the Museum*, reconsidering authority in the museum is essential to reclaiming representation, which in itself is a technique for constructing and reinforcing identity. Education, and particularly “a language of politics and pedagogy”, is needed to empower people to understand how “dominant vocabularies promoting stereotypes that deprive people of their history, culture, and identity” are constructed (Trofanenko 61). Considering that it is the public museum that constructs these dominant vocabularies, such an education should be seen as a fundamental obligation to its visiting public. G.B. Dahl and Ronald Stade in *Anthropology, Museums, and Contemporary Cultural Processes* discuss anthropology as a product of the field of tension between two ways of contextualizing knowledge: empathy and analysis (Dahl, Stade 168). They later affirm the acknowledgement on the part of theoreticians and critics that audiences have the right to arrive at their own interpretations (Dahl, Stade, 169). If this is so, negotiating the tensions between empathy and analysis is rightly the work of the visitor, shared with the historian and curator.

A Needed Vocabulary

Dahl and Stade make a distinction between the cultural vocabularies of others [let's call them museum visitors] and the kind of theoretical vocabulary that attempts to contextualize cultural vocabularies in distinct historical, political, and economic settings, opening them for comparison (Dahl, Stade 169). Fostering the development of this vocabulary, which could also be called historical literacy, among the visiting public should be the focus of museums as an investment in cultivating individual historical practice and supporting a participatory historical culture. While Conrad admits that the general public is lacking in higher order historical thinking relative to most professional historians, she claims "Americans had not abandoned interest in the past but that many people were not particularly interested in the national narratives that commanded the allegiance of politicians and educators" (Conrad 68). While the *Canadians and Their Pasts* data shows that Canadians value collective /nation-state oriented memory more than their American counterparts, autobiographical remembering was still the fundamental way that Canadians used their pasts (Friesen, Muise, Northrup 235). L. Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative*, introduces the discursive gap in asking "what if visitors generate meanings that are different from the interpretations presented by the museums?" (Roberts 8).

This is a significant challenge both from the perspective of learning about history, and as it impacts on the potential for the public to share authority in the museum. Barbara Franco in *Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective*, suggests that “multiplicity of viewpoints in exhibitions ...reflects the way that audiences actually receive and process historical information”. Audience research shows that visitors combine abstract information with highly personal and specific memories to create new syntheses for themselves. Museum visitors move comfortably from personal reminiscence to abstract issues, and back to personal or global meanings in a seamless process that is quite distinct from the carefully constructed arguments of academic discourse. Audiences are often critical and distrustful of presentations that seem to offer only one viewpoint and prefer to make their own judgments from a range of possible interpretations (Franco 67). The findings of this research suggest that a rethinking of how narratives are constructed for exhibitions may be fruitful. For example, more emphasis could be placed on creating opportunities for visitors to bridge the personal and the global such that a synthesis like that described by Franco can be facilitated and supported in the exhibition space.

Innovation in communicating knowledge in the museum setting must also be conscious of the parameters of the free-learning environment. Jan Packer specifies that conditions for learning in the museum must be such that: it is enjoyable, seemingly effortless, encompasses a mixture of discover, exploration, mental stimulation, and excitement, appeals to multiple senses, is potentially transformative, and offers the availability of choice (Falk, citing Packer 57). In addition, one must not discount the visual spectacle of the museum and its exhibitions as factors in attracting visitors and communicating information. According to Falk, design matters (Falk 99), and if Rabinovich's descriptions of museums' goals are accurate, it matters a great deal, both in terms of exhibitions, the larger spectacle, and touristic draw of the institution itself. Thelan provides a way forward suggesting that "by placing individuals at the center as both actors in and observers of history, we can build a historical culture around participation" (Rosenzweig, Thelan 184). The optimal interaction model for engaging visitors must then place them at the centre and provide the means for them to exercise choice, act, and observe. The other requirements involve rewarding visitors' sense of exploration and discovery with layers of content, preferably engaging multiple senses, affirming what has already been said about the value of presenting choices, depth, and multiplicity.

With museums across the globe investing in the research and development of new technologies including augmented reality and other mobile applications, an unprecedented opportunity for inter-institutional cross-pollination and sharing of ideas, research and promising practices for nurturing historical practice in the free-learning environment presents itself.

Building Historical Literacy in the Museum

In a recent training session provided by facilitators from the Legacy of Hope Foundation to secondary school teachers from the Ottawa Carleton District School Board on a new history-based curriculum, a teacher of grade 10 history stated she no longer taught content, but rather the skills by which history is learned, articulated through ‘the big six’ historical thinking concepts. She was referring to a framework of six historical thinking concepts created to provide a way of communicating complex ideas to a broad and varied audience of potential users, as articulated by Peter Seixas, Director of the Historical Thinking Project (Historical Thinking, par. 3). The six concepts, each with its own problems or tensions, reflect the ways in which historians create historical accounts and interpretations. They highlight the means by which representations are constructed and workable accommodations are made (Seixas, Morton, 3).

The six concepts are historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension. The framework and practical resources developed by the Historical Thinking Project have, in some jurisdictions, revolutionized the way history is taught in the classroom. Applied within a museum education and interpretation model, the framework and concepts can contribute to creating intelligent, compelling, thought-provoking exhibitions, interpretations, and educational programming that invigorates historical practice.

Migrating the framework to the museum environment however poses significant challenges. For example, the museum environment is one of self-directed learning, where visitors from diverse backgrounds have chosen to spend their leisure time. After considering a substantial collection of recent work on the subject, it would appear that the optimal interaction model must close the discursive gap in teaching visitors how to think like historians, afford visitors the opportunity to negotiate the tension between empathy and analysis, be user-centric and provide active choices, allow visitors to assume historical identities, access lived experiences, provide a multiplicity or range of viewpoints, allow visitors to construct their own interpretation, be attractive and well-designed, contribute to the visual spectacle of the museum, and educate in an enjoyable and seemingly effortless manner.

However, these requirements can be fulfilled in a number of different ways; as an example, one model could involve casting the visitor in the role of storyteller. In this scenario, rather than having historians, curators, and interpretive planners create short-lists of artifacts with which to construct narratives about an historical event as part of their process of designing an exhibition, they could provide an extensive long-list from which the visitor constructs a story in the exhibition space. The artifacts could be categorized within the historical thinking framework such that, for example, in assessing historical significance, the visitor could determine a content hierarchy that reflects his/her own historical practice, and then move on to another concept. This process respects the highly personal aspects and motivations of history construction. Despite the endless combinations of artifact hierarchies, indeed the endless variations on the subject(s) of the exhibition, the stories will remain products of historical research, albeit with widely diverging interpretations. Learning from the output of the ‘work’, visitors will have the potential to change museums’ understanding of both history and historical practice. Herein also lies the opportunity for visitors to share authority in that their interpretations may be shared not only with museum staff but also with other visitors. Visitors are rewarded with power and the ability to exercise a degree of choice unprecedented in traditional exhibitions, while acquiring skills to better understand history and its construction.

The interaction model could encompass elements of digital (passive and interactive) technology and live interpretation as well as access to static, traditional media, and objects. Most importantly it must be participatory, offering reward for visitor investment in interaction. Here, teachings from Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Falk's identity work, standards in the toolkits of many interpretive planners, come into play. There should be opportunities to engage with language, logic, sound and music, kinaesthetic materials/objects, space, historical and 'other' identities, as well as to reflect on self. The space should be visually compelling and inspiring. A mechanism for documenting, sharing, and bridging stories created by visitors should be integrated, critical to research and to validating the visitor commitment to 'identity-work' and historical practice in the exhibition.

A New Role for Museums

Although the roles of the museum as initially defined by Rabinovich and MacDonald remain, the aspects that communicate a single narrative or authoritative voice must continue to be challenged. As articulated by Black, "...some history museums... are beginning to develop approaches to display that engage users with the lived experiences of others to encourage reflection and understanding.

This relates directly to an increasing ambition on a local, national and international level to see museums as centres for civil engagement, with a primary role in reducing tension between community memories and promoting understanding between communities” (Black 423). Taking the position of facilitators of individual and collective exploration and learning of visitors, and learning from them, rather than disseminating pre-conceived narratives to them, museums have the opportunity to promote historical participation and social and cultural engagement. Tracy Jean Rosenberg in *History Museums and Social Cohesion: Building Identity, Bridging Communities, and Addressing Difficult Issues* asserts that museums have the capacity to enhance social cohesion and connect to communities. “When a person sees a connection to his or her own experience, that person feels connected to the museum and to what is being represented there, whether it be a group formerly considered “other” suddenly rendered less strange or an event far in the past to which parallels can now be drawn” (Rosenberg 118). She suggests that the ability of museums to command diverse audiences provides unique opportunities for education that school curricula fails to offer (Rosenberg 118). What then, are the implications for the CMC? Despite having performed consultations and gathered data from across Canada posing questions like: *What is the Canadian story?*, *Who has shaped our country?* and *Whose perspective would you use?*, how this information is going to be used by the CMC has not been communicated to Canadians.

The potential here would be to ask those same questions and present the mechanisms by which they may be answered, or explored, in the exhibition space itself. And so, regarding a new role for the Canadian museum, and specifically the CMC, rather than continuing to promote the idea of national sovereignty, it could instead promote a process of cultural sovereignty, wherein connection, difference, complexity, multiplicity, and conflict may be safely explored.

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