

CSWS Research Matters



Touchstones, Touchscreens and Timeless Tall Tales

A Feminist Analysis of Communication Practice in Exhibitions

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I suspect many of you might not have read this sentence had I used the word “museum” in my title! Yet, museums are fascinating microcosms and surprisingly under-researched organizations. I am working on a book, tentatively entitled *Touchstones, Touchscreens and Timeless Tall Tales*, which offers a feminist analysis of communication practice in public museums. Across the chapters I use a touchstone (a slate tool, used for assaying whether or not something is a precious metal) as artifact and metaphor, to consider the possible curatorial and viewer interpretations of one object across aspects of the museum communication cycle.

Museums are complex, dynamic social institutions in which exhibitions are the medium for the creation and consumption of influential historical narratives. Unlike private or commercial galleries, museums are publicly accountable and held to different professional and ethical standards. The stereotype of museums as old-fashioned warehouses of antiquities belies the power exhibitions have to naturalize normative understandings of social realities and their supposed historicity. Whether we think they are boring or exciting, we believe exhibitions and, according to various large-scale surveys, trust museums more than other media (e.g., Conrad, Létourneau, & Northrup, 2009; Gardner, 2010; Lake, Snell, Parry & Associates, 2001).

To generalize, exhibitions naturalize the narratives they communicate via displays of authentic historical material. Relying on objects is highly reductionist (only some survive over time, get collected, and are display-worthy), and while museums have recently moved away from object-centeredness, real objects still have incredible significance. Their existence is the point here, not their tangibility or physical presence in a show. The further point is how they are literally or figuratively framed, and otherwise interpreted. In the simple choice of pronouns used, label text in an exhibition on Ancient Egypt, for example, might subtly assert the unintentional message that contemporary American gender inequalities are the norm across cultures and time. This projection of current gender norms is supported by re/presentations of authentic ancient artifacts (“realness” and “oldness” connoting “trueness”) and the popular perception of museums as credible, authoritative public spaces. Such narratives, developed for broad lay audiences, are gendered and reinforce the status quo.

Like other media, museum exhibitions communicate subtle messages that perpetuate social stereotypes. Media studies, however, largely ignores museums. Museum Studies (encompassing museology and museography) is a highly multidisciplinary field for which a theoretical core is still emerging. The literature on exhibition development is surprisingly small and technically oriented. Front-end and formative evaluations are increasingly being adopted to test prototyped content, but such methods look for broad response trends versus expert responses. While anthropologists, historians, and art historians have published ample criticism on content of finalized exhibitions, there remain relatively few publications dedicated to critical analysis of museum communication *process* (e.g., Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). To date there has been little analysis of associated museum practice that is both critical (versus technical) and holistic (looking at more than one phase in the communication process).

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Above: A touchstone (image source Wikimedia Commons). Right: A label, framing our attention at Musée Albert Kahn, Paris. / Photo by Phaedra Livingstone.



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Looking at such knowledge construction holistically is important as the various functions involved in the communication cycle have traditionally been treated independently in museum literature. There has been a “silo effect” of analyzing exhibit development practice, visitor research, or collection management in isolation. My project addresses this, with the objective of informing professional practice. The book articulates a model of exhibition theory and practice, applying an intersectional feminist analysis to phases of exhibition development, supported by case studies.

There has been ample work on the representation of women or “source communities” in exhibit content, but very little considering intersectionality or gender relations in exhibitionary practice. Haraway’s well-known essay “Teddy-bear Patriarchy” offers a unique example of articulating the gendered epistemologies informing the many phases in the creation of two dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, but such deconstructions are rare and usually more limited in scope. Even so, critiques of museum products have only indirect influence in changing related museum practice. Practitioners still struggle with understanding their collections in post-positivist terms, with many

implications for museum practice. Increasing the demographic diversity of audiences has received considerable attention recently, but this work generally considers one variable at a time (usually ethnicity) and one aspect of participation (e.g., visit numbers). The social and epistemological diversity of museum staff has been largely ignored.

To illustrate the complexities of this intellectual challenge, the book maps the perspectives on the significance of an artifact (i.e., as aesthetic experience; as commodity; as cultural patrimony; as scientific and historical data) of those involved in the various stages of its interpretation (collecting; documenting; displaying; viewing; responding). Across book chapters, my conceptual model is demonstrated through case studies considering gender representations and relations. The associated museum practices considered include curation, interpretive planning, exhibition design, community consultation, collecting and digitizing collections, facilitating visitor experience (in-gallery and online), and evaluating visitor feedback. My concern goes beyond the question of *how* to most ethically or accurately engender historical consciousness through museum exhibitions; these same artifacts and

displays also hold the power to help us imagine alternative futures. While ample critiques of institutional power have been offered, the power of specific museum practices to reinforce ideas about gender (and identity generally) needs much more critical attention.

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude for the support this project has received to date, in particular, a 2012 CSWS Faculty Research Award and the 2013 Smithsonian Institution Fellowship in Museum Practice. ■

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