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MFA Thesis, Museum Exhibition Planning + Design
Department of Museum Studies
The University of the Arts, May 2012

ONE OBJECT *many voices*

From Participation
to Interpretation

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A thesis submitted to The University of the Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Masters of Fine Arts in Museum Exhibition Planning + Design

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dedication

To my parents for their continued support.

acknowledgements

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Special thanks to my friends and family who have listened very patiently and been subjected to surveys, questions and the like over the past ten months, regarding participation in museums.

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The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Isabelle Heyward find it satisfactory and recommend it to be accepted.

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abstract

In museums and beyond, there is a growing expectation from the general public for the chance to leave a mark and express how a particular subject or object is relevant to people today. Participation is an approach of engaging the public in museums, paralleling the paradigm shift in how our society approaches learning.

As participation continues to transform the museum experience, the field continues to explore how to make the results of participation an integral part of the informal learning environments that museums present. While researching the roles participatory experiences can play in exhibitions, two elements seem to often be diminished: the visitor experience of the non-participant and a central role of the museum's collection. This thesis explores how the results of participatory activities could be used to address both elements.

The rise of public history in the 1970s—when the use of oral histories paired with traditional historical narratives became more accepted—paved the way for multiple voices to be represented in contemporary history museums. The inclusion of public contributions in object-based exhibitions capitalizes on the experience of museum exhibitions as sociological events, especially in these local history museums. Exhibiting contributed content allows museums to democratize the interpretation of objects: presenting a conversation about why an object is significant which includes museum and academic experts, as well as the public. This project provides an approach to how contributed content can create a new process of interpretation that can give breadth to curatorial content.

This thesis works to link public engagement intricately with museums' origins as collecting institutions: their communities are represented not just through collections, but also in interpretation. The proposed exhibition development process is a way to find a balance between active participation, the results of participation, and continuing to present the learning environment visitors expect when at a museum.

*part one: **introduction***

premise for thesis

During the course of the 20th century, American museums shifted from collecting institutions that were primarily cabinets of wonder, towards more open collecting institutions of public service. Starting in the early 20th century, these museums moved their focus towards “exhibition, education,...conveyance of culture—and a commitment to community and social welfare” (Alexander, 10). Today, most institutions strive to serve and connect with communities and present their collections as significant and relevant to contemporary life.

Participation is a growing approach to engaging the public in museums, paralleling the paradigm shift in how our society approaches learning. In museums and beyond, there is a growing expectation from the general public for the chance to leave a mark and express how a particular subject or object is relevant to people today. The integration of Web 2.0 practices—which include user-centered design, information accessibility and sharing, and collaboration—within museums accommodates this expectation as well as makes institutions more reflective of the communities they serve.

Participatory experiences are becoming more commonplace in a variety of institutions: from children’s museums to art, science, and history museums. Allowing visitors to contribute their own content in exhibitions is a way for museums to connect with their audience. As participation continues to transform the museum experience, the field continues to explore how to make the results of participation an integral part of the informal learning environments museum present.

While researching the roles participatory experiences can play in exhibitions, two elements seem to often be diminished: the visitor experience of the non-participant and a central role of the museum’s collection. Museums can channel engagement to the collection and use objects as a catalyst for participation. The results of participatory activities, content contributed from the public, could be used to address both elements.

The changes which occurred in the field of history in the latter half of the 20th century helped to lay the groundwork for including public contributions in history museums specifically. The rise of public history transformed the field in the 1970s with the integration of personal stories into traditional academic narratives. What was—at the time—something radical, is now more commonplace in exhibitions and similar projects.

Including public contributions in an object-based exhibition capitalizes on the experience of museum exhibitions as sociological events, particularly in a local or state history museum. Collections preserve relics of our cultural identity, sharing them through exhibitions prompts a greater understanding of how society functioned and has developed into its present state. As societies become more diverse, people are looking for ways to connect to each other. Museums, especially contemporary history museums, have the ability to use personal narratives connected to their objects to illuminate ways in which communities can connect. Including content contributed by the greater public aids in our understanding of what objects the

museums deems valuable enough to preserve and collect and why. Exhibiting contributed content allows museums to democratize the interpretation of objects: presenting a conversation which includes experts and the public, about why an object is significant.

This thesis proposes an approach for museums to use objects to focus public engagement in a collection-based history museum, creating a balance between participation and a central role of a museum's collection. Modeled after the 'Readers Write' section of *The Sun*, this project explores how contributed content can be used in an object-based history exhibition. Beyond a proposed approach to collecting and exhibiting contributed content, this thesis outlines the value of contributed content in exhibitions, how it can be used to effectively add to the interpretation and information on file of museum objects, and reasons it should be archived by a history museum. In effect, this thesis builds on the field's exploration of why and how contributed content can matter most to a collection-based local contemporary history museum.

Case Study Brief: Readers Write, *The Sun*

The mission of *The Sun* magazine—an independent publication based out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina—is to present the “diversity of the human experience” (Saunders, Phone Interview). A section pivotal in achieving this goal is ‘Readers Write.’ Each month, in ‘Readers Write’, a subject is posted (in print and online) with a call-to-action to write how you are the authority. What results is a collection of very short (two lines to half a page) personal stories of how contributors make meaning of the given topic. The magazine staff edits the contributions so that the resulting section represents a conversation, between people with different inputs and backgrounds, about the different ways the subject can be interpreted. Context created by the contributions makes for a powerful illustration, giving the subject meaning well beyond what only a dictionary could. This section is different than a wiki model in that it uses personal stories to enrich definition, rather than contributions that actively try to define a subject for a greater number.

In depth case study, including a writing example can be found on page 16.

nomenclature

Casual Visitor: A museum visitor who is not a contributor during the exhibition development stage.

Contributed content: (As defined for this thesis) Content from the general public that comes in the form of stories connected to/inspired by museum's objects. How and what the public can contribute is inspired by not only the objects but provocative questions posed by the museum. This content does not necessarily have to be recognized by a museum as historically significant, although it can be. This thesis posits that contributed content will be best gathered during the exhibition development stage in a designated participatory space. For this thesis, contributed content is the result of object-focused, visitor-centered participation.

Curatorial authority: The expert voice of the museum that produces definition of object and curatorial content; most readily found on the ID label and wall panels in an exhibition. Here, the academic scholarship of the museum manifests.

Development: The exhibition development process. Phases of exhibition development are broken down into: conceptual phase (idea gathering), development phase (planning and production stages, including all exhibition design), functional phase (operational and terminating stages), and assessment phase (evaluation of project) (Dean, 191-200). This thesis affects all phases; planning, and production stages within the development phase are most impacted. A full outline of proposed steps and how they fit into David Dean's model for exhibition development can be found on page 56. Dean's model was used as a standard because of its general nature and frequency in research.

Contemporary history museum: For this thesis, history refers not to ancient history, but to a more recent one, such as American history. Local and state American history museums are a focus throughout this thesis.

Interpretation: An explanation of an object or collection beyond what can be typically found on an ID label (title, date, materials, owner, etc) that forges emotional and intellectual connections between interests and inherent meanings.

Interpretive developer: Someone deeply connected and knowledgeable about the collection who heads the interpretive team (see below). Depending on the institution, this could be either the curator or exhibition developer.

Interpretive team: A team of exhibition developers, designers, curators, and educators (and other departments, depending on the institution) that is formed in the conceptual phase of exhibition development and guides the interpretation of objects and content in an exhibition. For this thesis, it is the interpretive team's role to choose objects to be used as a catalyst for participation, and vet and select contributed content for exhibition and archiving.

Object/museum object: A museum accessioned artifact with importance noted by an institution.

Participation: A way to engage and connect with the public at large in a museum: in exhibitions, programming, etc.

Relevancy: Why an object or idea is important, and how it impacts and/or influences public audiences' lives. Contributed content illustrates how an object/idea/subject can be relevant to the contributor in historical and contemporary contexts. This is a reference to Hein and Falk's (among others) idea that visitors construct their own meaning based on personal knowledge and experiences.

Value: The relative worth, merit or importance of meaning determined by a museum, the general public, and an individual.

mission

The mission of this thesis is to propose an innovative approach for museums to create new relevancy around objects through contributed content. This approach guides object-focused, visitor-centered participation. Once curated, contributed content can add to the interpretation of objects for the casual visitor and the information on file for the collection. (This proposed process would ultimately become integrated into the museum's exhibition development process.)

goals

- Propose an approach—guided by oral history best practices—that uses objects as a catalyst for participation before and during the life of an exhibition.
- Explore how contributed content, vetted by the interpretive team, could be used along with content from the museum expert to enrich interpretation of objects for the casual visitor: exhibiting a 'conversation' of how and why an object has relevancy to the broader public.
- To explore why and how contributed content could be archived by an institution, so that it can serve the interpretation of museum objects in a lasting way.

Case Study Brief: *Object Conversations,* University of Colorado Museum of Natural History

Object Conversations, on view from March 2005–April 2006, featured 25 objects selected by curators. The premise of the exhibition was to exhibit selected objects along with different peoples’ interpretations of them: artists, musicians, writers, as well as museum experts. Visitors were given a chance to contribute their own interpretations as well during the life of the exhibition. The University of Colorado’s Museum of Natural History (UCMNH) aimed to “explore how objects can trigger a variety of responses depending on the viewer” (Theil). The exhibition strived to provide an opportunity for visitors to engage in conversation with and about objects.

In depth case study can be found on page 28.

impact statement

Building from the rise of public history and the growing use of participatory activities in museum exhibitions, this project provides an approach to how contributed content can create a new process of interpretation that can give breadth to curatorial content. Selected contributions, along with content from the museum expert, exhibit a dialog around objects which illustrates how and why museum objects can matter to a variety of people today: enhancing historic and contemporary relevance for the visitor.

This thesis works to link public engagement intricately with museums' origins as collecting institutions. The use of public contributions could enable objects to not just tell the stories of our past, but our present communities and societal state.

This project considers best practices in gathering oral histories and looks to the 'Readers Write' section of *The Sun* as a model, to create an approach for gathering and exhibiting contributed content with museum objects. The desired exhibition would be similar to *Object Conversations* from the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, in which interpretation from a variety of different sources was available for selected objects. However, this model aims to exhibit written contributions from the public *along with* content from the museum expert and museum objects, not separate from.

This project uses contemporary local history museums to focus the proposed model. Their collections contain objects that are more psychologically accessible than

ancient history museums. In this museum discipline, the exhibition and preservation of contributed content can help tell and preserve a community's history. As the proposed process becomes more common-place, the type of institution that adopts this approach could expand.

audience

The proposed approach affects all phases of David Dean's exhibition development process model, mostly impacting the development phase (191-200). The audiences for this thesis are museum staff that are most involved in developing exhibitions at a collecting institution: exhibition designers, developers, and curators; as well as public historians. This project impacts how the museum field approaches both exhibition development and the role visitors can play in shaping museum content and interpretation. This impact hopes to parallel the attitude towards the use of oral histories in the field of public history.

This thesis focuses on history museums with medium to large collections (with flexibility in objects to exhibit). An object from the Philadelphia History Museum (PHM) at the Atwater Kent will be used to test part of the proposed application. The Community Gallery at PHM will be used to propose a gallery layout.

How this thesis is applied impacts the casual visitor experience. The participatory model proposed in the thesis application impacts those that choose to contribute.

Case Study: 'Readers Write', *THE SUN*

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: *The Sun* magazine out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, provides an example of how public contributions can create context and significance. Each month, in a section titled 'Readers Write', a subject is posted, with a call-to-action for readers to contribute how they relate (examples: authority, boxes, paying attention). Once edited, the roughly five page section presents 25-30 short personal stories of how contributors make meaning of that subject. The readers' understanding of what the given word or phrase means to them is enriched through the contributions of others. Contributions contextualize a subject, giving the subject meaning well beyond what only a dictionary could.

GOALS: The goal of *The Sun* is to present the 'diversity of the human experience'. 'Readers Write' was created to help satisfy this goal. Editors want the section to act like a conversation, where people with different inputs and backgrounds are represented.

HOW WERE CONTRIBUTIONS GATHERED? 'Readers Write' asks readers to address subjects on which they're the "only authorities" (*Readers Write*) is the solicitation provided by the magazine. The same prompt for contributions is used every issue. The magazine clearly states that not every selection is chosen to publish and contributions may be edited.

Luc Saunders, Assistant Editor of *The Sun*, said that initially they wanted "to throw the ball out there and see what came back" (Phone interview). *The Sun* cannot predict what people will write, but there are often

This chosen contribution is meant to represent the varied interpretations of the given subject rather than the overall writing caliber published in 'Readers Write.'

Issue 443, January 2012

SUBJECT GIVEN: BOXES

When we were kids in the late 1950s, my brother and I used to ask our mother, "What are we?"

She would always answer with school-teacher-like certainty, "You're half black and half Puerto Rican."

Our father was Jamaican. Our neighbors were mostly African Americans who had recently moved to New York City from the South. We were bused to a school where most of the students were Jewish. So I can see why we wanted to know where we fit in.

In the sixties I aligned myself with the black-power movement, and I announced to my mother that Puerto Rico was a country and black was a race, so she was mixing apples and oranges. Also my mother's family was from the sugar plantations in Puerto Rico and obviously of African descent—not 'Spanish,' as my mother called herself. My definitions were part of a new sensibility that she didn't completely understand or even care about.

As I grew older, I earned degrees, traveled to many countries, and married three times. My third husband was white and a southerner. Today I teach in a university graduate program. In this modern world we're constantly asked to identify ourselves—on census reports, job and mortgage applications, car-loan forms. I ask my students to do something that I'm still learning to do myself: not to be in such a hurry to check a particular box.

(Full name disclosed in magazine but withheld in this report.)



(*'Readers Write' Study cont.*)

concurrent themes, which help staff edit down. People often write to the editors to express that the published contributions help them understand ways in which they can relate to subject.

OPPORTUNITIES: "We cannot tell everyone's story, but we can tell a lot." (Saunders, Phone Interview).

Saunders feels that this section is important for readers because when they see someone else's story it helps them to make sense of their own. Readers say that this is their favorite section because a variety of voices are represented, it "elicits sympathy and empathy for our fellow man" (Saunders, Phone Interview).

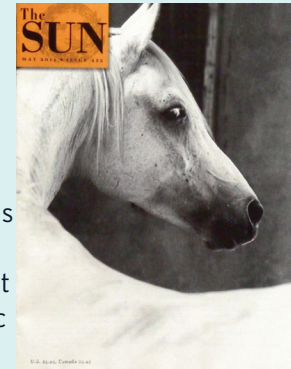
NOTES: 'Readers Write' meets the goal of presenting the diversity of the human experience by exhibiting different voices. However, it should be noted that this can be considered a successful project because the contributed content is edited and curated to focus the section. As in participatory environments within museums, not every contribution is valuable to the general public. It comes down to crafting a story using multiple voices, so that 'Readers Write' is a published conversation about a subject. This thesis works to translate 'Readers Write' into an object-based exhibition experience. The resulting exhibition, along with presenting the museum's collection, would aim to present the diversity of the visitor experience.

The subjects chosen by *The Sun* have inherent meaning, though this meaning varies from reader to reader. The

approach can be applied to this thesis' application approach. Choosing objects with inherent meaning for the general public may produce more varied results because there is less effort towards understanding the subject (or object for this project). Participation may seem more accessible as their understanding is based on prior knowledge and experience rather than something newly learned.

Saunders notes that occasionally readers write to the editors that the 'voice' of the magazine and editing is apparent in the published contributions. This is not avoidable because without editing and curation, the section would be increasingly disjointed: clarity in focus and presentation enables the information to be more accessible to the reader than it would be otherwise. Even with curation and editing, the magazine is presenting perspectives that wouldn't be accessible if the public was not contributing.

The contribution prompt communicates trust and power to the writer and tells them that their contribution is valuable to the success of the 'Readers Write' section. This approach will be applied to this thesis' application. Communicating that contributions will be valued and are necessary to the institution and the casual visitor could prompt more thoughtful responses.



part two: research

The Museum and the Visitor: from Objects to Public Engagement

Vocabulary describing the concept of museums has existed since the 16th century: translated as 'gallery', galleria in Italian, or 'cabinet', *gabinetto* in Italian and *wunderkammer* in German (Alexander, 5). All refer to a museum being a place in which people viewed a collection of sorts. Since their inception, museums have been keepers of collections: objects that mark time, place, nature, and people for the present day. As Hilde E. Hein notes, "nothing has seemed more central and essential to the very being of a museum than its collection"(4); the collection is a fundamental element to a museum's identity, and the identity of the community it represents. The scholarship of these institutions has also been historically present, often times creating an intellectual barrier between the museum object and the public.

After World War II, the number of museums in the United States grew exponentially. Government funding has been unable to keep up; museums have had to financially rely on private funding and visitors more (Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 28-29). Museums, considered public institutions, began to perform their service through offering educational opportunities along with preserving the collection and conducting research. Institutions are expanding their utilities and service within communities to appeal to and engage the public they serve. Placing themselves in a central community role helps to ensure a museum's future in financially treacherous times as well as meet a shift in museology.

From a theoretical standpoint, how museums function in society has shifted as well. John Cotton

"Nothing has seemed more central and essential to the very being of a museum than its collection..."

-Hilde S. Hein, 2000

Dana's vision of a "new museum" was an institution that did not just house a collection, but made service to its community a priority. Starting with Dana in the early 20th century, museums have been pushed towards stronger community roles and public engagement (Weil, "Introduction"). This transformation has become the foundation of a groundswell movement, starting at the end of the 20th century to engage the public as active participants (Simon, "Introduction"). In 2002, the American Association of Museums passed a Museums and Community Resolution which prompted all institutions to be "active and collaborative in their communities" (Biggs, 3785). Many institutions are exploring roles that keep themselves relevant for the communities they serve: giving visitors a larger psychological presence with 'talk-back' spaces, visitor surveys and comment cards. However, with this comes new visitor expectations for access to information and transparency of authorship.

In recent years, some museums have adapted Web 2.0 practices in order to accommodate the growing expectation for active participation in learning and cultural institutions. Web 2.0 practices include user-centered design, information accessibility and

“The Museums’ relationship to its collections and to the ownership and care thereof will change, ...On the content side museums will become more comfortable with presentations that contain a multiplicity of viewpoints...On the interpretive side, museums will be less apologetic about including emotional and evocative messages. These changes will help museums become more effective storehouses of cultural information.”

-Elaine Heumann Gurian, Museum Consultant, 1994

sharing, and collaboration: all of which can be seen in exhibition approaches today. The change that Gurian mentions above is coming about through the inclusion of the general public in exhibition creation and many other facets of the museum. Participation is helping to transform not only the museum, but the visitor experience as well.

Authority and content creation in museums is now more readily shared with the public “in a dialogical process of civic engagement” (Spock, 8). Engaging the public with participatory experiences is a step in the continuum of museums shifting towards more central community roles. However, museums should not ask visitors to participate and contribute if the act of engagement ends there. To truly engage visitors in a dialog, the results of participation could be used by the museum: in exhibitions, interpretation, and information gathered for future use. Exploring how participation can benefit the visitor experience of those who are not participating is also a necessary venture.

While sharing the institution with the public makes the museum more representative of their audience, the scholarship of the museum—a necessary good—must not be compromised. John Falk looks at what drives people to museums in *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Falk lists motivations for why people visit museums: learning objectives, the space itself, social engagement and exposure to things and ideas that are considered the best by experts (63-65). What all these motivations share is the desire to be in a learning environment. Visitors look for the expert, most often the curator, to exhibit and tell them what to value. Formal scholarship paired with a collection lies at the foundation of what a museum has historically been and is still considered today. Social engagement and exposure to things and ideas that are considered the best in a community are not mutually exclusive: the curators can exercise their expertise in focusing the results of participation.

Active public engagement is helping to shift museums from cabinets of wonder, towards institutions of active learning. Exhibitions, which once included only objects

with accompanying curatorial content, can now be places where many voices are represented and a variety of objects—both museum object and not—are displayed. Over the last several decades, the field of public history has also embraced interpretations that include multiple viewpoints. Rather than posed as dichotomy, oral histories are paired with traditional scholarship to create a more rounded story. As Michael Frisch notes, in the “Introduction” to *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, the previous split between academic history and oral histories was as “unnecessary as it was limiting,” though before the 1970s, the validity of oral history’s use was often questioned. Parallels can be drawn between the use of oral histories in recounting the past and the current use and questioning of contributed content from visitors. The combination of contributions from the public and traditional scholarship in history museums helps to illustrate that everyone owns history. A history museum’s communities can be represented not just through collections, but also in interpretation. In a contemporary local history museum, object interpretation should reflect the sociological complexity of the world around us and opening up interpretation to include multiple sources can help to meet that goal.

Exhibition design plays an important role in presenting contributed content with objects and meeting visitor expectations. Curatorial content should be distinguished, through design, from contributed content so that those uninterested in outside points of view can still easily find the scholarship they expect to see in an exhibition.

Case Study Brief: *Forces of Change*, Oakland Museum of California

Forces of Change uses individual, niche, exhibits developed and designed by people outside the museum to tell the story of the tumultuous period of 1960-1975 in California. In this exhibition, Kathleen McLean and Adam Nilsen devised an exhibition development process that gave creation of the niche exhibits over to twenty-four Californians, chosen through the museum’s community advisory boards. The goal of *Forces of Change* is to exhibit multiple perspectives of what was going on during this iconic and complex time in California’s history.

The exhibits display mainly personal objects (only three using museum objects); bios of participants are included next to exhibits. There is no expert interpretation of the time period covered in the gallery, nor interpretation by the creators presented next to their niche exhibits.

In depth case study can be found on page 42.

Designing contributions into graphic panels can communicate to the visitor that contributions are valued and vetted by the institution. Exhibition design shapes how visitors interact with both content from the public and from the museum expert. Presenting visitor contributions only through hand-written post-its says—with materials used—that the content lacks permanence and is not as important as what is in panels. Through a more formal design presentation, the casual visitor can see that contributions have been chosen by the museum.

Participation is a valuable tool in creating constructivist learning environments: open-ended learning and visitor-focused experiences (Hennes, 106). However, as Kathleen McLean asks, can an exhibition that engages the public in co-creation ever be more than “a sum of its parts” (*Exhibitionist*)? The effort gone into creating successful participatory experiences can detract from the museum’s formal scholarship and the visitor experience. As Hilde E. Hein notes, with expansion of a museum’s public role and educational offerings, there is a “diminishing prominence assigned to the collection” (8). Its collection and scholarship is what differentiates a museum from any other type of institution; the ultimate goal is to showcase these elements while engaging visitors.

Engaging visitors as active participants within museums is not a fad but a movement that is transforming the museum experience, both inside and out. As Daniel Spock notes, people within the field have a hard time

seeing the value in “democratizing the collection”(7). However, engaging the public can serve what historically made a museum—its collection—in a way that does not detract from its formal scholarship, but gives it renewed purpose and relevance. A rigorous approach to focusing contributed content enables institutions to exhibit it without compromising their scholarship. The casual visitor relies on the institution to convey the most meaningful results of contributed content. While visitor participation is desirable for the museum, not all results—such as qualitative opinions—are desirable for the casual visitor.

A balance should be sought between engaging the public in active participation and continuing to present a learning environment that appeals to the casual visitor. The proposed application of this thesis does not radically use the results of participation in interpreting objects in favor of catering to the majority of visitors: those that do not participate. Until the effects of participatory models on the exhibition experience of the casual visitor are assessed, institutions should temper pushing projects too far towards public control, throwing off this balance.

Throughout research, there seems to be a line drawn between museum professionals and the public. In considering how contributed content from visitors affects museum scholarship, visitors are rarely given credit for being possible experts themselves, just not ones from within the institution. If museums are truly striving to engage their visitors, there should be trust communicated and value implied towards the public. Good ideas and information can come from

anywhere. Under the right conditions, how a non-expert finds significance in an object can be as valuable to understanding as the expert's content.

Museums define themselves through their collection as well as the communities they serve. Engaging the public should ultimately serve both ends. This thesis posits that a local contemporary history museum designate a space in which contributions can be gathered to feed into other exhibitions. This small space—ranging from 250 to 50 square feet—would work to engage the public while also showcasing objects from the institution's collection. Creating a constant, defined space for a participatory experience conditions the visitor towards an active museum experience. A designated space could be provided for visitors to act as collaborators within the museum, without compromising the exhibition experience of the casual visitor.

As communities become more diverse, people strive to find ways to connect with each other and the world around them. The goal of *The Sun* is to “present the diversity of the human experience” (Saunders, Phone Interview). This can also be seen as an underlying goal in exhibitions, especially at contemporary history museums. Presenting personal stories as interpretation can help to exhibit diversity and foster communities. However, this pushes an institution to design public programs that reach out to different constituencies, so that diversity through interpretation can be represented within the museum.

Meaning Making + Interpretation

In the current pedagogical shift from didactic to active learning, public engagement becomes more important in exhibiting museum objects. Historical objects are valuable because of the stories they hold, the events they mark and the times and people they represent. They become socially significant because of the relationships we have with them, transformed by experiences (Hein, 51). What are the learning opportunities of sharing these relationships and experiences?

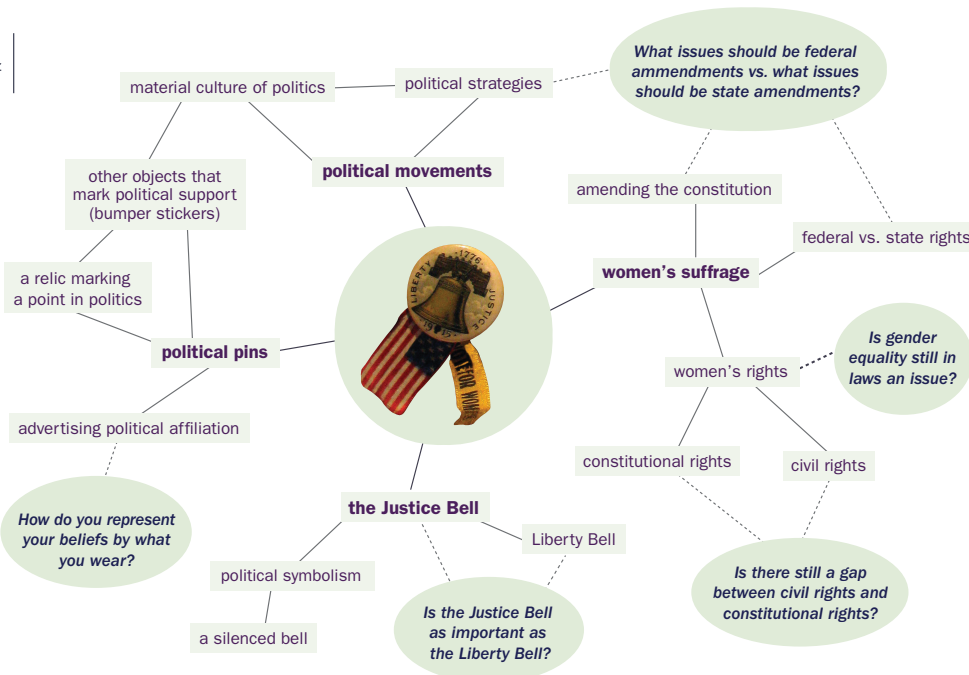
“Objects are formed through acts of attention.” -Hilde S. Hein, 2000

In the front-end study conducted for *Object Conversations* (detailed as a case study), visitors showed relatively low interest towards museum objects. This study reflects a reoccurring thread in research: it is difficult to engage visitors directly with objects.

However, once objects' stories (both scientific and personal contributions) were presented alongside, interest grew considerably (*Object Conversations, Project Statement*). Jumping from survey results, the exhibits team assessed that objects' stories needed to be a key factor in engaging visitors with them. When someone engages and makes meaning of an object, they are perpetuating its relevance and meaning (Hein, 8).

Meaning making defines the process of understanding content based on previous experiences, something visitors hopefully exercise in exhibitions. Experience-based learning, under which meaning-making falls, has three elements: direct experience, process, and understanding; all of which comprise the inquiry cycle (Ansbacher, 23). Prompting visitors to contribute content about how they relate to an object engages this inquiry cycle: self-motivation is a driving force in informal

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Subject map of suffrage pin (from Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent's collection).

learning. Seeing how participating visitors make meaning of an object may also prompt meaning-making for the casual visitor.

When preparing for an oral history interview, a public historian creates a subject map: a graphic illustration of a subject and different tangents the upcoming interview could go down (Hardy, Phone Interview). In gathering oral histories, the interviewer wants the personal they interview to feel comfortable and open. Rather than structuring the interview, the map is a tool for the interviewer only. Creating the map allows the interviewer to see a larger picture of ways in which thought tangents can relate to the subject at hand. The power of oral histories is that personal stories encapsulate beliefs, attitudes and information about events in a more emotive way than is possible with academic approaches to history (*Interviewing Guide*). This thesis aims to assimilate this approach to interpreting objects.

This process proposes that the interpretive team creates a subject map of the selected object. (An example of the subject map created for a suffrage pin from the Philadelphia History Museum's collection is on the previous page.) The resulting map, which contains both tangents stemming from the objects and a range of questions for the visitor, will be exhibited in the participatory space as a tool to facilitate contributions. Presenting the subject map along with the object illustrates that there are many 'entry-points' into making meaning of an object and promotes a broader range of interpretations. Even if the visitor does not participate,

the subject map can spur the inquiry cycle and aims to engage the visitor with the object. The museum, like the interviewer gathering oral histories, wants participants to feel comfortable in contributing. Illustrating possible ways a visitor could make meaning of an object may make contributing more psychologically accessible.

The 'Readers Write' section of *The Sun* engages readers and contributors in the inquiry cycle. Luc Saunders, Assistant Editor, notes that the magazine often receives feedback that contributions within 'Readers Write' help readers understand how the provided subject is significant to them. This thesis aims to use meaning-making of museum objects to the same effect in an exhibition: so that exhibited contributions provide multiple access points to how and why an object is significant. Saunders states that they edit submissions to publish based on how they play off of each other. This thesis proposes that museums take a similar approach in selecting contributed content for display in exhibitions. The presentation of how different people find significance in an object communicates to the visitor that what objects can mean is an open discussion.

"The Museum is an 'empowering' institution, meant to incorporate all who would become part of our shared cultural experience."

-Mark Lilla, Professor of Humanities, Columbia University 1985



Forces of Change visitor write-in area.
Courtesy of The Oakland Museum
of California.

Besides basic identification label text, curatorial content reflects what the institution chooses to say. Curators currently seek information on objects from outside sources (such as lenders); but the resulting content still has limited viewpoints. The inclusion of public contributions expands the process of interpretation within an exhibition. At a time when museums are shifting towards more community-centric roles, representing the public in the interpretation of a collection is a next step: exhibiting their viewpoints gives exhibitions shared authorship.

Forces of Change at the Oakland Museum of California, (detailed as a case study) exhibits objects in a way that supplies context, and references their relevance (Adair, 75-78; McLean and Nielsen 41-44). However, when the gallery opened, there was neither written museum content nor written interpretation by participants in the gallery. This can be seen as a missed opportunity in exhibiting meaning making. The institution gave participants space to present how they understood the time period; but without clear interpretation of their exhibits, visitors felt that the experience was lacking. Based on comment cards and a summative evaluation, the exhibition was amended to include a book of exhibit descriptions by participants. Even though these descriptions are now available, they are in a book, not presented alongside their exhibits. Without clearly presenting interpretation, this gallery becomes more experiential than informative; only catering to one type of exhibition experience.

Museums aim to engage visitors in a dialog about the content, ideally in the exhibition space. *Object Conversations*, at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History from March 2005-April 2006, presented multiple viewpoints—including the museum experts’—of object interpretation. As the website states, “Objects may be important to a curator for one reason and to a visitor for another” (*Object Conversations*, ‘Home’). Soliciting public contributions is a way to capture what people are thinking and how they’re responding to objects. This thesis explores how to exhibit a conversation around objects that would hopefully carry on into the exhibition space. The design of the participatory activity is an important element in meeting this goal. When posting contributions, participants can be encouraged to build off each-other to create a visible dialog visible.

One of the motivations for visiting museums that Falk lists is the desire to engage in a meaningful social experience. Using public contributions brings a social aspect to an exhibition that would not be possible otherwise. It adds to our sociological understanding and helps both the visitor and the institution understand why museum objects are important and relevant to us. Including contributed content moves the museum closer to the ‘living organism’ Dana described in *The New Museum*: an institution whose approach to interpretation reflects their contemporary community (29). Public programing designed around the participatory experience will be necessary in reflecting a community in interpretation.

Ideally, providing interpretation that includes personal stories addresses two of Bernice McCarthy's 4MAT learning styles: innovative, the learner who observes and personalizes; and, dynamic, the learner who designs new application and examples (Fortney and Sheppard, 25). Integrating public contributions into an object-based exhibition creates learning environments with a larger variety of outcomes by giving multiple interpretations from which to draw.

The research report, "Ideas, Objects or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team Views Visitors Anew" categorizes visitors by those that favor: ideas, objects, or people; in terms of the content they seek (Mogel and Pekarik, 472). Presenting contributions with objects adds a personal element that may attract those visitors who favor 'people' oriented content. An exhibition can better cater to multiple learning and interest styles by including content that addresses all three of these interests. Contributed content is authored by fellow visitors, represents a variety of ideas, and helps to interpret an object.

By placing objects at the center of active visitor participation, a deeper understanding and appreciation for the collection can be gained. Exhibiting the resulting contributed content gives the institution's community a pivotal role in interpreting the collection. Their inclusion could help visitors better understand their fellow community members as well as the objects within their museum.

"Out of these and other new trends may come the likelihood of producing institutions that use a multiplicity of 'meaning-making' processes that fit better with people's natural learning and cultural-transference styles."

-Elaine Heumann Gurian, 1994

A thematic, object-based exhibition is one type of exhibition in which contributed content could be used for additional interpretation. An example is an upcoming beer-themed exhibition at the Philadelphia History Museum. The exhibition model that this thesis proposes would be most appropriate for a contemporary, rather than an ancient, history museum. Their collections often contain objects that were once everyday items, given value through the stories they possess. Their familiarity and social significance are more relatable than items of ancient history.

Case Study: *Object Conversations*,

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: March 2005–April 2006. *Object Conversations* featured 25 objects selected by curators in a 2,200 square foot gallery. The premise of the exhibition was to exhibit the selected objects along with how different people interpreted them: museum experts, community participants, and visitors. Visitors were invited to contribute their own interpretations as well. The University of Colorado's Museum of Natural History (UCMNH) aimed to “explore how objects can trigger a variety of responses depending on the viewer” (Theil).

A front-end evaluation determined CU students found the museum's collection to be somewhat uninteresting, however once coupled with stories (some personal, and some scientific), students found the objects more intriguing. From this study, the exhibit team determined that the objects' stories are a key part of their appeal. *Object Conversations* (OC), was a ‘total experiment’ (Hakala, Phone Interview), exploring how visitors could actively engage with objects from the collection. UCMNH encouraged visitors to explore objects through multiple perspectives and develop their own meaning.

Public programming was designed around this exhibition, with workshops led by both scientists and members of the creative community.

GOALS: The goals of the visitor experience were: To encourage visitors to engage with the objects in an active way; to validate visitors' responses to those objects in a forum that underscores multiple

perspectives; to invite visitors into the museum process by including their voice in the exhibition (*Object Conversations' Project Statement*).

HOW WERE OBJECTS TO FEATURE CHOSEN? Curators from each section of the museum (Anthropology, Botany, Entomology, Geology, and Zoology) chose 5 objects that they felt had a ‘cool’ story that would appeal to visitors.

HOW WERE CONTRIBUTIONS SOLICITED? Members of the local creative community were asked to examine the objects and CUMNH curatorial content and consider answering questions provided by the exhibition department. Their contributions were recorded and exhibited via a video loop within the gallery. Written contributions from participants as well as their bios were in a notebook on display near the video.

REAL-TIME OPPORTUNITY TOO? The introductory panel clearly outlined the concept of the exhibition and encouraged visitors to join the conversation about objects.

Signage prompting visitors to contribute read: “Feeling Inspired? Guests with something to say created these cards. Would you like to share anything about the objects in this exhibit?” (*Object Conversations' Project Statement*).



Courtesy of The University of Colorado Museum of Natural History.

(Object Conversations Case Study cont.)

The writing station for visitors, which included a table and chairs, was separate from objects and the rest of the exhibition. Jim Hakala, Senior Educator, noted that visitors often responded to each others' comments in cards, so that an conversation seemed to grow through the contributions displayed.

A selection of ribbons was also available for visitors to vote with: placing them next to specific objects with 'most unusual object', 'most beautiful object', etc.

Staff pruned contributions to keep them focused and initially seeded the visitor contribution process.

HOW WERE CONTRIBUTIONS USED WITH MUSEUM OBJECTS? Contributions from neither participants nor visitors were exhibited next to museum objects. All participants' responses were grouped together either on video or in the notebook. All visitor contributions remained on the 5"x7" cards on hung racks within the gallery. Visitor contributions did not graduate to a different format, though most of them were archived by the museum.

Only curatorial content from within the institution was exhibited directly with objects. Objects were placed on asymmetric tables under vitrines, were seemingly unrelated objects were juxtaposed to spur conversation. Questions were mixed into the display to prompt visitors to explore how the objects were connected. (Example: 'How do you study a species you can't even see?' was on a table which held a beetle too small to be seen by the naked eye and a brontothere skull.) ID label information was presented on top of the table as well. Within the table, under each vitrine, was a drawer, inside lay the curatorial content explaining the object's significance. Remedial changes were made, adding a prompt for visitors to open the drawers to access the curatorial interpretation of the objects.

NOTES: Jim Hakala, Senior Educator at UCMNH stated that it was a conscious effort to keep public (both from visitors and participants) contributions separate from the museum objects and curatorial content. The curators felt that the design of the space and placement of content should communicate that the exhibition was a conversation about the objects and their possible meanings, but, above all else, the museum is still the scholar and the curators

were still in control (Phone Interview). The curators felt very strongly that contributions from the public should be kept separate from their content. It should be noted, that the visitor first experienced the objects with only basic ID information, not even curatorial content. There should be a clear separation between content that is coming from within the institution and from visitors, especially for those expecting the museum's scholarship. However, OC could have taken their concept of exhibiting and prompting a conversation around objects further if these three groups' (curators, participants, and visitors) contributions were exhibited around objects together to create a conversation through presentation, not just in separate areas.

One of the visitor goals was to "validate visitors' responses to [those] objects in a forum that underscores multiple perspectives" (*Objects Conversations' Project Statement*). The exhibition encourages visitors to contribute but lets them know, through the exhibition's design, that their contributions are not valued enough to be part of a conversation with other participants or curators. Participants' and visitors contributions were also physically separate from the objects they addressed; without being able to immediately see the object in question, contributions' impact may be mitigated.

Hakala expressed UCMNH's interest in approaching this exhibition model again, but on a larger scale (Phone Interview). If this was done, I would assume

that the exhibition team would push this project even further towards an exhibited conversation between the curators, participants and visitors.

Supplying visitors with ribbons such as 'most beautiful' and 'most unusual' to place next to objects seemed like a tacked-on participatory element which could undermine the powerful message of the overall exhibition. Perhaps it was added to engage a younger audience that would not so readily write a comment card. Results of the front-end survey conducted for this thesis showed that people felt strongly against seeing contributions that merely voiced opinions and had no greater learning value.

Hakala stated that the main challenge in approaching this exhibition was engaging visitors with objects. Curators were asked to pick objects they felt would elicit a reaction. The UCMNH exhibition team felt that this was a successful exhibition in terms of meeting their goals and engagement visitors with objects. If more obscure objects were chosen, these goals might have been harder to achieve.

Museum Challenges

A Question of Authority or Expectations?

Engaging museum visitors in dialog and letting them feel heard are goals for participatory models. However, this should never compromise the museum's role as a place in which visitors expect academic scholarship. As Fred Wilson states, authority in a museum should not be shared to the degree that "you devalue your [the museum's] own scholarship" (Adair, 237). Supplying 'talk back' areas and outlets for visitors to share their stories occurs now in institutions. To continue transforming the museum through participation, using contributed content within exhibitions is something to be tested and explored. However, curatorial scholarship should continue to play a central role in exhibitions along with museum objects, for casual visitors and those not interested in content from the general public. Clarity of content authorship is essential in presentation: especially for content from the museum expert.

MN150, which ran from October 2007-December 2011 at the Minnesota Historical society, asked people to nominate the "most influential sources in the state's history" (Roberts, Museums 2.0). The resulting exhibition included participants' stories along with supporting expert content and objects; the community's voices were represented in the exhibition. In this example the institution did not lose sight of their scholarship and the importance of their collection: both were used to support an open dialog.

Institutions like the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) deliberately share their authority with their community. The *Public Perspectives* exhibition series in their Community Gallery allows Brooklynites to use a designated space for community-curated exhibitions. BHS makes their collection available, and allows curatorial scholarship to be almost completely replaced by the voice of the community. However, curators and historians vet all content presented within *Public Perspectives*. Basic ID label information—including the objects' provenance—is still exhibited, supplying visitors some type of content they can only get from the museum. *Public Perspectives* is an example of an institution sharing the platform and giving authority over to the community. The designed exhibition lets visitors know that content has been reviewed by the institution; and the museum trusts what the community curators have to say. *Public Perspectives* is also just one gallery within the museum; visitors who seek expert content have others exhibitions to satisfy that preference.

As Wilson notes, authority is like a "checks and balances system" (Adair, 240); each form of content should be presented with mind to the other. As previously mentioned, *Forces of Change* was revised after opening with an introductory panel telling visitors of the unusual exhibition process, and supplemental information interpreting the participants' individual exhibits. One can infer that the lack of interpretation and museum scholarship did not meet visitors' expectations of being exposed to expert content (or any other type of content beyond an experiential space). Some felt there was not a

“Is there something fundamentally disingenuous about museums pursuing these participatory models, if control is bound to remain the prerogative of the museum?”

-Daniel Spock, Director of the Minnesota History Center Museum, 2009

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clear enough sense of curatorial authority to give the exhibition the weight and formality that visitors often look for when they visit a museum (Adair, 75-78). This exhibition's presentation does not provide visitors with a balance between scholarship and personal, emotive stories. *Forces of Change* is within a larger exhibition space that adopts a more traditional approach to content and objects. However, the institution should make different types of content available to visitors, effectively embracing a broader range of meaning-making outcomes.

Museums court visitors into participating; it should fall on the institution to use that participation effectively. Spock's quote, questioning if there is “something fundamentally disingenuous about museums pursuing these participatory models, if control is bound to remain the prerogative of the museum” speaks to the insincerity of providing participatory experiences without valuing the results. However, there needs to remain some control of content in order to provide visitors a focused exhibition experience. Exercising control over what contributions are chosen to be exhibited enables the museum to use the results of participatory models effectively.

This project proposes that an interpretive team be formed to collaboratively share control over content that is exhibited as object interpretation. Contributions posted in the

participatory space will be less controlled by the interpretive team, though irrelevant contributions should be taken down. Luc Saunders notes that occasionally The Sun receives letters from readers, noting that the magazine's ‘voice’ is apparent in the contributions selected for ‘Readers Write’. However; Saunders also notes that this may be inevitable, but they are still able to represent a larger number of people with ‘Readers Write’ than without. While the museum does retain control over what is exhibited, what they can draw from represents more diverse views than if content only came internally.

Perhaps exhibiting contributed content is not a threat to curatorial authority so much as it is a threat to not meeting visitors' expectations of having access to curated, scholarly information. One motivation Falk gives for visiting a museum is the expectation of being exposed to what scholarly experts consider the best. This thesis proposes that the interpretive developer continues to act as expert in regards to content. However, adding public contributions to what is curated enables an institution to present broader interpretation. Contributed content can help to exhibit a conversation about how an object can be interpreted, but a deluge of voices could be overwhelming and distracting for the casual visitor.

Respondents to the front-end survey conducted for this thesis were receptive to contributed content in an object-based exhibition with the caveat that it remain relevant to the subject at hand and not merely be a qualitative opinion. Respondents expressed concern that contributions would distract from their experience of expert content. Reviewing contributions before exhibiting

them as object interpretation ensures that they remain relevant. Curating contributions allows the interpretive team to present selections that exhibit and prompt a dialog about possible meanings. It should be expected that some visitors will disregard contributions no matter what format they take or whether or not they were vetted and selected by museum experts. Visitors may be prompted to contribute if they believe the nature of their input is better than what is presented, or they may not find the experience appealing. No exhibition can appeal to every visitor, though it can work to include and engage more.

In the 1970s the field of public history struggled with the presentation of oral histories along with academic approaches to history; what can be gleaned from this? In Michael Frisch's Introduction to *A Shared Authority*, he states that oral histories (contributed content) have the "capacity to unearth and communicate more complex meaning in the materials with which they [public historians] deal." Frisch also notes that subjects develop a "new sharpness and focus through the combination" of oral histories and scholarly research.

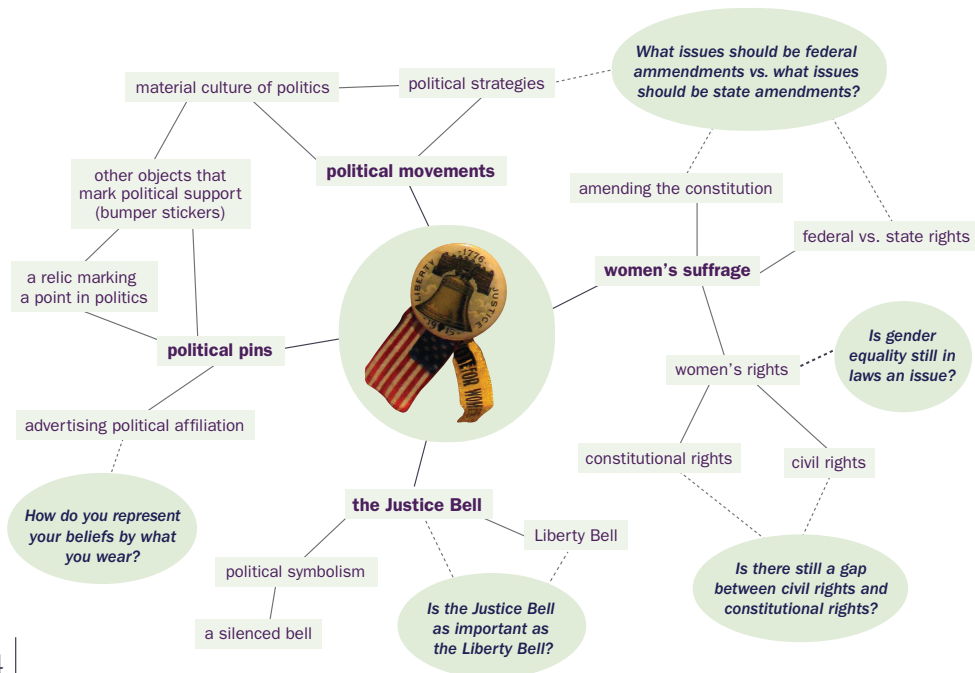
Exhibiting contributed content is important, particularly for a history museum, because history is a branch of knowledge based on past events that a variety of people relate to in a variety of ways. Jill Austin, curator at the Chicago History Museum, relays that when public contributions are exhibited she acts as a facilitator; she is still directing, but understands that there are multiple viewpoints that should be exhibited (Phone Interview). If museums truly see themselves as 'arbiters of truth'

(Spock, 7), then this is an approach that edges closer to a more inclusive interpretation of history. In terms of contemporary history, people do not need scholarship to speak with authority of their own experiences. Exhibiting contributed content is a way of saying that the book of history is not closed; it is open to presenting many voices. This is an act of engaging the public in dialog; curating results of participation enables it to be effectively exhibited. Carrie Hogan, curator at the American Swedish Historical Museum says "It's about sharing authority, making that transparent within the community, and affirming people's experiences" (Phone Interview).

A Shift in Roles

Curators, developers and designers shape an exhibition's content and interpretive approaches. It is impossible to presents all the stories an object can hold. Exhibiting contributed as well as expert content allows an institution to introduce a variety of approaches to understanding the significance of objects. Authorship of content can become transparent, which is increasingly important in a history museum, as historical content is only what was recorded or passed down.

This thesis proposes that the role of the curator, or interpretive developer (a term including both the curator and exhibition developer, defined in nomenclature) is shifted to accommodate and facilitate participation. The interpretive developer exercises expertise by guiding



Subject map of suffrage pin

the process as well as heading an interpretive team, which can include exhibition designers, developers, subject experts, curators and educators (as well as other departments, depending on the institution). The interpretive developer would be the main content/ collection expert on the team. This internal collaboration allows for different department agendas to be addressed. Decisions made by a collaborative team of museum staff and outside experts can be more inclusive of what contributions are ultimately used. Using a team also shares the responsibilities outlined in the development process. Besides the interpretive developer, the members on this team should change per project, based on subject and scheduling.

The Interpretive team selects objects, based on exhibition themes, to use as catalysts for participation during the planning stage of the development process. While a museum adapts to this process, objects with more obvious meaning for visitors should be chosen as a catalyst for contributions, to make participation more accessible. However, as both the museum and visitors become conditioned to this type of participation, choosing more obscure objects could be explored. Using a less familiar object allows more interpretation to be applied through participation. The use of added interpretation highlights selected objects and concepts within an exhibition.

The interpretive team will use a step in best practices of gathering oral histories to approach soliciting content from visitors during the planning stage. The team creates subject maps for selected objects through brainstorm sessions. Ideally, the team has both collection experts and those who are less knowledgeable about the object, so that a variety of thought tangents can be represented that do not only hinge on prior knowledge of the object. Creating the subject map with a team, rather than just one person, allows points on the subject map to have range. The interpretive developer, who heads the team, can help to cite provenance and past interpretation of the object when creating the map. The structure of these brainstorming sessions should remain loose, as the subject map is meant to represent a snapshot of ways an object can be interpreted. Thought tangents represented on

INTERPRETIVE TEAM STRUCTURE

SHORT TERM: The team should be made up of a variety of museum staff, including (but not limited to) curators, exhibition developers and designers and educators. Experts from both within the institution and from outside, such as public historians, should also be included.

LONG TERM: As the institution becomes acclimated to having an interpretive team, it should expand to include community members and others outside the institution who are not noted experts.

the subject map should be clear; however, points should aim to be broad enough for different interpretations, and not about specific details. (An example of a subject map created for a suffrage pin from the Philadelphia History Museum's collection is on the left.)

This thesis proposes that a designated participatory ('working') space exist within the museum to constantly gather contributions to use in 'final' exhibitions throughout the museum. The subject map created by the interpretive team, will be used as a tool to facilitate participation, along with gallery signage in the 'working' space.

The interpretive team vets and curates contributions gathered during the production stage for exhibition during the operational stage. The team uses the goal of presenting varied interpretive approaches to an object to guide selecting contributions. Those chosen should aim to present a dialog about an object's significance. Using a team to select contributions for exhibition (and later archiving), aims to keep control over content more democratic than if it fell to one person. In the proposed

thesis application, the interpretive developer guides the process, however the team guides content choices.

The internal structure of the interpretive team will vary depending on the institution. In a contemporary local history museum, public historians should be included when possible. Once the internal staff becomes comfortable with this interpretive approach, an institution can bring in community participants as team members. Progressively, the museum could expand its institutional interpretation strategy to be more inclusive.

Archiving Contributions: Negative Limitations and Positive Repercussions

This thesis proposes that museums—specifically contemporary history museums—not only gather and exhibit focused contributed content, but also archive it with collections information (data and provenance). Historical institutions aim to foster understanding of their community's story and preserving societal attitudes serves that end. Goals for archiving contributions should be: to preserve community contributions as public record, to preserve institutional memory of an exhibition, to add to the information on file for objects, and to archive considering future researchers.

The Denver Community Museum, an experimental museum that was open for less than a year, is an

ARCHIVING

SHORT TERM: Create archival process that starts in the Planning Stage, when contributions are generally reviewed by the interpretive team and noted for future archiving by team members or support staff.

LONG TERM Also involve participants in the archiving process: enable visitors to note keywords within their contributions that can be turned into meta tags when contributions are archived.

example of a museum that heavily engaged the public in contributing objects and content in the development process. However, all contributions (objects and written content) were returned after the run of each exhibition. Throughout research, the results of participatory models seems to be rarely kept and not truly valued by the museum. Most institutions discard products of participation after it has served its purpose. How can the exercise of participation be more than a short-term exercise? So that its product is instrumental in how institutions approach interpretation, not just during the run of an exhibition but for future projects as well? In historical institutions archiving contributions is especially critical because it helps to preserve a community's history.

Museum professionals surveyed for this thesis voiced concerns that should be addressed when contributions are archived: archiving should follow a practical approach, and not all contributions should be preserved. Content contributed by the public is unpredictable in nature. It will be difficult to establish general guidelines in determining what contributions should be archived beyond interpretive quality and preserving ones that represent a community's

diversity. Basic guidelines to be considered would be: those contributions exhibited or nearly exhibited; contributions that represent diversity in experience, culture or background; and contributions that address subjects not called out on the subject-map created during the planning stage of exhibition development. While reviewing and curating contributed content, thematic groups can be organized and filtered so that what is archived represents larger quantities of contributions.

The task of archiving contributed content is daunting and could be addressed earlier than the end of the exhibition to make it more approachable. During the planning stage of exhibition development, the interpretive team should tag, or note, which contributions should be archived during the terminating stage (end of the exhibition). At the end of the planning stage, the team needs to review and vet collected contributions to determine which should be exhibited. Determining which contributions should also be archived at this time to makes use of the general review. At the end of an exhibition, there is often a push to move on to the next project. Considering archiving earlier in the process takes the impending time crunch into account and allows support staff (such as volunteers, or interns) to take over archiving later in the process.

A key element in archiving contributions would be advanced planning: how contributions will be archived (file format, meta tagging, etc.) should be considered as the interpretive team reviews contributions at the end of the planning stage. Archived files should have a searchable format which follows outlined steps, so the

same process of archiving is used by the interpretive team, volunteer or intern. All archived contributions should be linked to the object around which they were gathered, similar to how the Folklife Division at the Library of Congress archives content gathered from the public in connection to its objects.

Contributions are not collected in a vacuum. One of the goals of the participatory space is that participants build from each other's contributions. Archiving contributions should consider that they possibly influenced each other. Thematic groups of contributions are determined during the planning stage; all archival records of contributions should note these groups when created during the terminating stage. This allows future researches to have a general overview of the other contributions' nature, which will help supply context. Noting all thematic groups will also allow future researchers to review the ways in which the object was generally interpreted.

As an institution acclimates to archiving contributions, they should explore how participants can have input in the process. The form on which contributions are written could call out certain information that visitors can fill in; such as where the participant is from, keywords they feel represent their post, etc. These keywords could serve as meta tags, adding to the information that is searchable for contributions. The design of these forms should be prototyped in the 'working' exhibition.

Currently both the Minnesota Historical Society and the Chicago History Museum are grappling with how

and if they should archive contributed content (Austin, Phone Interview; Roberts, Email Interview). Archiving additional material takes resources and planning: both time and money seem perpetually scarce in museums. This thesis does propose that history museums adapt new steps in the exhibition development process, including how and when to archive contributed content. Like any new process, there would be a transition phase, in which an institution would adapt an archival process that best fits their available resources.

The front-end survey for museum professionals conducted for this thesis also outlined major benefits to archiving contributed content. While many institutions currently engage the public with participation both during the exhibitions development stage and during the life of the exhibition, seldom are the contributions digitally archived. This process aims to make the time and energy spent engaging the public benefit the interpretation, information on file, and institutional understanding of the collection in a lasting way. Museum professionals down the line could reference contributions to understand how interpretation can be approached. This is a way to follow trends and assumptions and maintain institutional memory of an exhibition.

“These changes will help museums become more effective storehouses of cultural information.” -Elaine Heumann Gurian, 1994

Contributed content captures how visitors make meaning of objects and adds to our greater sociological understanding of what we deem significant and why: archiving keeps this record.

Most importantly for a history museum, preserving contributed content preserves a snapshot of social attitudes of the time. This helps to save the data and knowledge of a community, and keeps that information in the public realm. As Kate Roberts, Exhibition Developer at the Minnesota Historical Society states, “they [contributions] give us a sense of what members of the general public were thinking at a specific point in time in history, and they’re relatively raw” (Email Interview). For institutions whose mission includes preserving and presenting the history of a community, archiving contributed content is arguably necessary.

Effects to the Exhibition Development process

This thesis proposes that history museum alter their current exhibition development process to gather, exhibit and archive contributed content. To accommodate additional steps, more advanced planning and time will be required while an institution adapts. Institutions often view engaging visitors in any type of co-creation process as a task that takes additional time and effort. Kathleen McLean, who has worked with co-created exhibitions, states that allowing the public to be participants in this

way does not necessarily take more time, the institution is just more aware of the process because it includes external input (Phone Interview). Exhibitions are never developed in a bubble, there are almost always outside sources of knowledge consulted and incorporated within the final exhibition; however, the authorship of the exhibition still remains within the museum.

This thesis proposes that contributed content not be gathered and exhibited for every object in an exhibition, only those selected by the interpretive team during the planning stage. (An example would be choosing a suffrage pin from 1915 to gather contributions around, for a larger object-based exhibition on constitutional rights.) This is an effort to create balance among participation, using the results of participation and continuing to clearly present expert content. Selecting only a few objects keeps the development phase feasible for the museum: managing the participatory process, collecting and vetting contributions for exhibition and archiving contributions. For the visitor, the importance of an object is enhanced through selection. Displaying contributed content as object interpretation for a larger number of objects could overwhelm the visitor experience.

Detailed further in the Application section, this thesis proposes that history museums create a semi-permanent participatory space (also referred to as the ‘working’ exhibition) designated to gathering contributions during the planning stage of exhibition development to exhibit during the operational stage. A constant space would mitigate the impact of the proposed process on the

exhibitions team as finding and designing a separate participatory space for each exhibition would no longer be an issue.

There is often a push to whittle content down as much as possible in exhibitions, however this thesis proposes that museums exhibit more interpretation along with selected objects. Design of the 'final' exhibition—which includes contributed content—will let visitors know that it is a different type of exhibition experience than elsewhere in the gallery. Something unexpected will be added to the visitor experience. Contributed content gathered during the planning stage should be presented within graphic panels so that the addition of contributions does not compromise the appearance of scholarship around an object, and it is clear that they have been reviewed by the museum.

Results from the front-end visitor survey conducted for this thesis offers clues for how to design an exhibition with contributed content for the casual visitor. 63% of respondents stated they would find an exhibition that included contributed content more appealing if it was also presented with information from the museum's curators. 53% stated that knowing contributions were vetted by museum experts would positively affect their decision to attend such an exhibition. A message from the survey is that visitors still want scholarship and focused content present.

"Ideas, Objects, or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team Views Visitors Anew" categorizes visitors as those who are most attracted to content addressing: ideas,

objects, or people. Including contributed content provides varied interpretation that appeals to those visitors who prefer content about people and ideas as well as those that prefer object-oriented experiences. Inclusion of contributed content addresses another key element of this research report: providing displays that attract and engage visitors according to their preference (such as those that might preference objects) and 'flipping' them to an unexpected experience (473). Exhibiting contributions could provide that unexpected experience that 'flips' visitors towards different types of exhibition experiences.

The ultimate goal in adding contributed content to interpretation is to use participation to add to the informative experience of objects. However, the emotive nature of personal stories also adds an experiential element to an exhibition. Contributions should be selected, or curated, with the goal of enriching the informative experience of the casual visitor. Respondents of the front-end visitor survey conducted for this thesis expressed an overwhelming need for contributed content to be relevant to the object/subject in order for them to feel as though it enriched their experience. Respondents voiced concern that the display of contributions would include opinions and superfluous anecdotes and be distracting.

The Museum of Broken Relationships, out of Zagreb Croatia, is an example of contributed content that is highly curated to create a focused exhibition experience. Theirs is a process that engages the public in participation, but contributions are selected to create a more powerful



Museum of Broken Relationships exhibition at The Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston. Courtesy of The Museum of Broken Relationships.

visitor experience than if every submission were presented. The premise of the museum is that the general public contributes objects and supplies all the content to be exhibited for interpreting the object. The object and content submitted tells the story of a broken relationship. Submissions include: the name of the object, the dates of the relationship and the interpretive text. Museum curators do not alter the contributed content or objects. However, they do not show all contributions, only ones that they feel help to address overall exhibition themes or provide nuanced interpretations of the cultures from which they came. In this way, engaging exhibitions are crafted purely from public contributions.

Using contributed content as object interpretation hinges on gathering thoughtful responses that can provide significance and relevance. The participatory process of gathering contributions is an admittedly unpredictable one. This thesis posits that museums prompt thoughtful responses by communicating trust to the participant. Conclusions from the front-end study for visitors conducted for this thesis support this theory.

The majority of respondents, 73%, stated they would be more likely to contribute if they saw other contributions printed on text panels (as compared to 37% which said they would more likely contribute if they saw other hand-written contributions). Only 3% of respondents stated they would be more likely to contribute if they were to be credited: getting their name on the wall of a museum is not a major motivating factor in contributing. One way to interpret this data is that visitors are more likely to contribute if they know the institution will value their input. Presenting contributions in a professional manner, such as through printed text panels, communicates that the museum approves and trusts input from contributors. One only has to look at the success of citizen science programs to corroborate this theory. The Museum of Science, Boston tells possible participants that their contributions are “essential to helping scientists” (*Firefly Watch Citizen Science Project*). I have yet to find, through research, a project within history museums that ascribes the same agency to collecting personal contributions from visitors. If institutions communicated that visitor contributions were essential to the success of crafting an

exhibition, responses may be more thoughtful results of personal motivation.

The prompt for contributions for 'Readers Write' communicates personal responsibility to the contributor; that writers are the authorities of their own experiences. The introductory text to *Object Conversations* clearly communicated that there are many ways to see an object and convivially invites the visitor to join the conversation. This text communicates the open forum the exhibition strived to achieve. Text prompting contributions in the designated 'working' exhibition should clearly communicate trust, value, and how contributions may be used.

How can the process of participation and the visitor experience of the final exhibition be balanced? Deborah Schwartz of the Brooklyn Historical Society, acknowledges that there might be times in which the "process of creating the exhibition is better than the end result" and that the visitor experience of the non-participant might be compromised (Adair, 112-122). Providing a separate space for participation is an effort to achieve balance between active public engagement and providing the learning experience people expect when they visit a museum.

A designated participatory space should be designed towards gathering evocative contributions. This space should aim to create physical and psychological comfort around the participatory experience. Using the products of the 'working' exhibition throughout the museum works to balance the process of participation with

the casual visitor experience: gathering contributions that add to interpretation does not dominate the exhibition experience.

There is little research available to fully understand how pivotal transparency of authorship is in a final exhibition. *MN150*, at the Minnesota Historical Society conducted a summative report that lightly touched on this topic. From the report: "very few respondents mentioned the user-generated nature of the exhibition content. A number of the interview questions offered respondents a chance to include the unique nature of content development for the exhibition, but no question asked visitors about this explicitly. It is likely that this unique approach to exhibition development is notable only for museum professionals" (Ellenbogen). However, 87% of respondents of the front-end survey conducted for this thesis responded that they would visit an exhibition that presented contributed content from the public. This data shows that knowing that content is coming from the general public is appealing; if visitors truly did not care about who was authoring content, would the response be the same? 87% of visitors also responded that they think reading or listening to other people's (visitor or public's) stories related to museum objects might help them understand how they could understand the relevance and importance of an object. The message in exhibiting contributed content is that the interpretation of objects and content is open, though data does not explicitly state that clarity of authorship is central to visitors.

Case Study: *Forces of Change*,

OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: Opened May, 2010. *Forces of Change* occupies a 750 sq. ft gallery within the larger exhibition, *Coming to California*; it represents the time period of 1960-1975 in California's history. Through planning meetings that included including developers, designers, community councils (Oakland Museum has several that guide projects), it was decided that the best way to tell the story of this iconic and complex time was by letting people tell their own stories. Twenty-four people from across California with different backgrounds and were chosen to tell their stories of identity, politics, social upheaval and diversity. The result was twenty-four unique enclosed period environments, or 'niches', each with a different voice and view of the period. There is no scholarly interpretation of either the time period or the exhibits within this gallery.

GOAL: Participants exhibit, for visitors, multiple perspectives of what was going on during this tumultuous time in California's history.

HOW WERE/ARE CONTRIBUTIONS SOLICITED?

Participants were recruited with the guidance of different demographic councils. There was no application process; gender, ethnicity, and expected story content were considered. The institution only set vague criteria for content and let the participants know they were part of an experimental process.

HOW WERE/ARE PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS USED (WITH MUSEUM OBJECTS)? The museum provided a list of artifacts available for display but only three

exhibits, of twenty-four, used museum objects, the rest used personal objects. There are no labels distinguishing museum objects from visitor-contributed objects, and no identification labels for any of the objects displayed. From research and interviews, it has become apparent that at the time of opening, there was no interpretation included with the niche environments beyond identifying the participant.

After the exhibition opened, through comment cards and a summative evaluation, visitors voiced a need for some kind of interpretation of the niche exhibits, specifically about why the objects were there and what they communicated. The institution asked participants to write one-page interpretations of their exhibits. For the most part, descriptions included information about how the objects illustrated their stories: focusing more on the experience than the objects. All of these descriptions were turned into a book that is on display within the exhibition space.

ARE VISITORS ALLOWED TO CONTRIBUTE AFTER THE EXHIBITION IS OPEN? Visitors to *Forces of Change* are able to write on note cards and use masking tape to affix their comments around the niche exhibits. Because there are no formal labels, the walls of this gallery and filled with hand-written comments, so that the space truly presents an array of voices from the community. These real-time contributions are pruned by staff to keep content focused.

(Forces of Change Case Study cont.)

NOTES: Kathleen McLean, development and design consultant for *Forces of Change*, voiced the concern mid-project that the unusual development process may eclipse the final exhibition. This statement shows a concern for the casual visitor experience at the expense of a participatory model.

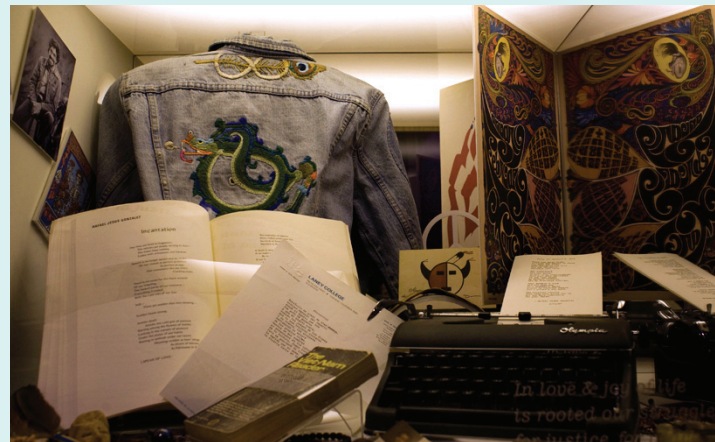
Participants' ideas are represented in the exhibition through their niche exhibits. However, without any content included for interpretation, the intention and process of the participants is not clearly shared with the casual visitor. It seems there was more focus on experiential perception of the niches rather than clarity of ideas. This approach, while successful in physically representing different viewpoints, stops short of fully considering the casual visitor experience through lack of interpretation.

One-page descriptions of the niche exhibits were added; however, by placing them inside a book on display within the gallery, their presentation becomes physically separate and closed off. The design of these supplementary descriptions still makes it hard for the casual visitor to suss out interpretation. The choice in placement of these explanations clearly reinforces that they are an after-thought and are not deemed important by the museum.

As sites for informal, self-directed learning, exhibitions should provide visitors with the tools they need to explore subjects and ideas fully. McLean noted that in designing the gallery, they did not want the walls cluttered with labels as they might distract from the experiential quality of the space. However, audio could be explored to communicate those personal stories. After all,

it is the stories that the niches are based on that makes them valuable to the casual visitor.

The niche exhibits present different perspectives and stories of a chaotic period in California's history, however, prominently exhibiting the participants interpretation or even loose scholarly framework of the period may give visitors more of a foundation from which to build their own understanding of the gallery's content.



Close-up of niche exhibit by Oakland artist Rafael Jesús González.
Courtesy of The Oakland Museum of California.

Looking Forward: Museum Opportunities

Exploring how public engagement can be integrated into the museum experience is not a new subject. The rise of participatory experiences in institutions is not merely a trend, but an approach to public engagement that is transforming the field. As this subject continues to be explored, one has to wonder what the next steps are. Museums continue to make their collections more physically and psychologically assessable and share the content platform with non-expert voices.

Presenting multiple viewpoints in a contemporary history museum can be seen as fitting because of the rise of public history since the 1970s. Oral histories, like contributed content, help to enrich institutional scholarship and illustrate that everyone owns history.

When does sharing the museum's collection look like a democracy? The process this thesis proposes asks that institutions trust the public and explore how their contributions can positively affect interpretation in a local contemporary history museum.

The practices proposed in this thesis may seem innovative now; however, as participation continues to be explored by the museum field, these ideas will become commonplace. The use of contributed content in object interpretation could parallel the use and gradual acceptance of oral histories in traditional historical narratives over the past several decades. Moving forward, the model proposed by this project could be adapted to a broader range of institutions, from art to science museums.

As places of informal learning, presentations should move beyond only exhibiting content from the museum expert, and embrace open-ended outcomes. Elaine Gurian states "the Museums' relationship to its collections and to the ownership" of it is changing, and that institutions are becoming more comfortable presenting "a multiplicity of viewpoints" with more "emotional and evocative messages" (171). Using contributions from the public can exhibit a conversation of how an object holds significance for a variety of people.

The results of participation can change not only the content exhibited but the interpretive strategy of the institution. For the casual visitor, viewing contributions from the public and an object's subject map can illustrate how museum objects matter in contemporary and historical contexts. Exhibiting contributed content with objects shares ownership, enhancing the richness and significance of a collection. Collecting, exhibiting and archiving contributed content provides museums

*"Presenting multiple points of view
should be natural for any museum
whose mission is public engagement."*

-Daniel Spock, 2009

the opportunity to better understand how the public is approaching their collection and content.

Moving forward, this process can work to shift the internal strategy of museums: creating more collaborative approaches to exhibitions and programming across museum departments and incorporating more community representatives.

USING THIS PARTICIPATORY MODEL

SHORT TERM: Contemporary local history museums should explore how to apply this thesis: finding a balance between participation, using and archiving the results of participation and continuing to present expert content; in a way that supports their missions for preserving and presenting a community's history.

LONG TERM: As these practices and approaches become more common-place, their use should expand to other museum disciplines.

Conclusions

“If you invite people to really participate in the making of a museum, the process must change the museum.” -Spock, 2009

Using select contributions to help interpret collections is a next step in exploring the role visitor participation plays in a museum. This thesis proposes that contemporary history museums use contributed content to aid in interpreting objects whenever possible to benefit both the casual visitor experience and the data of the collection. This thesis proposes that contributed content can be gathered through object-centered, visitor-focused participation, wherein selected objects are used as a catalyst for contributions during the planning stage of the exhibition development process.

Exhibiting curated contributions as a facet of object interpretation brings meaning making from the subconscious into the conscious and could trigger the inquiry cycle for casual visitors. The exhibition of the subject map in soliciting contributions aims to meet the same end: thought tangents are graphically illustrated for visitors and possible contributors. The subject map created for an object can be used as a tool to facilitate participation.

Elaine Gurian states it well when she says: “out of these and other new trends may come the likelihood of producing institutions that use a multiplicity of

‘meaning-making’ processes that fit better with people’s natural learning and cultural-transference styles” (177). The approach of this thesis relies on contributors’ meaning making to help both visitors and the institution understand what objects museums deem important enough to collect and preserve and why. Possible ways in which casual visitors can make meaning of an object can be triggered by both the subject map in the participatory space and contributed content in the final exhibition. Institutions will be able to exhibit a dialog in both, communicating to visitors that there are many ways of understanding how an object can be significant.

In trying to find a balance among active participation, using the results of participation, and still clearly presenting expert content, this thesis proposes that where visitors contribute and where contributions are used as object interpretation are separate spaces. In this way, off-topic, non-vetted contributions do not clutter the display of museum object for the casual visitor or those visitors uninterested in what the public has to say.

Exhibiting additional interpretation from the public may be seen as a threat to meeting visitor expectations for curated scholarship. In order to still satisfy this visitor expectation, the interpretive developer, together with the interpretive team, should utilize their expertise by selecting vetted contributions to exhibit. This will produce a curated selection that represents diverse ways to interpret an object’s significant and relevance. The exhibition of contributed content does not intend to replace expert scholarship, but enrich it. This thesis

“The boundaries between these institutions are blurring as we discover that we need, in some cases, to replace older and no-longer functioning forms of cultural transmission and, in others, to take on the task of storing new kinds of material. Museums with their broadened definition can become important, even central, institutions of memory.” -Gurian, 1994

posits that the museum expert's content needs to be presented as well.

A consideration of this thesis is the exhibition experience of the casual visitor. Using Nielsen's web-participation rule, one sees that: for every 100% of web visitors, 90% do not contribute at all, 9% contribute occasionally, and 1% of visitors contribute almost constantly. This thesis considers the experience of the 90 and 9%, using results from the 1 and 9%. While the project may not seem radical, that is the point. Throughout research, while exploring where participation fits into an exhibition, institutions seemed to often lose sight of the experience of the 90%. Creating a participatory model that gives more control over to the 1% is not using public engagement in a sustainable way. Until more studies are conducted assessing the impact of participatory models on the exhibition experience of the 90%, institutions should look for solutions that are palatable to both the institution and the public.

Because only 1% of visitors contribute the majority of content, institutions will need to explore and facilitate public programming around the participatory model.

The entire 10% of visitors who contribute (those that occasionally and frequently participate) cannot fully represent the public. However, using contributions from the 10% represents more of the public than an interpretive team would be able to otherwise. Using the results of participation in interpreting objects is a step towards exhibiting the diversity of the visitor experience in exhibitions. An array of programming, reaching out to new constituencies would be fundamental in representing diversity, so that the 10% is not solely self-selecting museum visitors. In this way, institutions use objects from their collection as a catalyst for public engagement.

There is a growing expectation, especially for history museums, to present multiple viewpoints. Taking into consideration Spock's quote from the previous page, “if you invite people to really participate in the making of a museum, the process must change the museum,” contributed content could change the process of interpreting objects in a history museum and become a given facet of interpretation. Once contributions are chosen by the interpretive team, the public's voice can be as instrumental and necessary as the expert's. It is then that a museum really represents its public: when

their meaning-making is exhibited along with scholarly interpretation. The mission of *The Sun* is to present the “diversity of the human experience” (Saunders, Phone Interview). ‘Readers Write’ is instrumental in achieving this mission because it presents contributions that speak to our experiences and promote sociological understanding.

This thesis also proposes that history museums archive those multiple viewpoints to serve as public record. Archiving select contributed content is important for historical institutions because it marks how visitors think about something at a point in time and helps to preserve our social history. For history museums this is particularly important because how visitors share their history enriches scholarly history. Archived contributions add to the data of the collection and help the institution approach interpretation in the future.

part three: application of thesis

Approach to Applying Thesis

The proposed application of this thesis is outlined on the following pages as steps integrated into David Dean's exhibition development process (191-200). Dean's model has been used as a guide because of its frequent appearance in research and its general nature. Each museum's exhibition development process varies, so the proposed application would need to be adapted based on an individual institution's needs and resources.

It is often difficult to engage visitors with museum objects, as noted in *Object Conversations*' front-end study. The objects chosen were picked because of the appeal curators predicted they would have for visitors. A step in this application is for the interpretive team to choose objects to use for participation. The proposed thesis application could ideally benefit the interpretation and information on file of any object; however, it is recommended that while an institution is adapting the proposed application to fit their needs, objects with inherent meaning should be chosen, much like the method used in *Object Conversations*. Choosing an object with obvious meaning for visitors may make participating more psychologically accessible: a visitor's understanding of an object may more likely come from prior knowledge. An example of an object with obvious meaning is a women's suffrage pin: political statement pins are a familiar concept, as is women's rights. The proposed application focuses engagement on the chosen object during the planning stage of the exhibition, when the object is used to gather contributions. During the operational stage the object is exhibited with curatorial and contributed content gathered during the

planning stage. In both instances, expanding possible interpretations with either an object's subject map or contributions representing varied sources, can prompt the inquiry cycle. Where contributions are gathered and where they are ultimately exhibited in printed panels are two different spaces, referred throughout this application as the 'working' exhibition, and the 'final' exhibition.

The prototyped portion of the thesis application (addressed in detail starting on page 67) approaches how a museum can facilitate thoughtful responses which enhance the casual visitor experience as well as the catalogue data of the collection. Prompts for contributed content need to reference ideas and subjects to give room for expression, not just object physicality. Desired contributions speak to how the contributor can relate to an object, similar to how contributions in 'Readers Write' exhibit ways different people relate to the provided subject. Anticipated contributions would address the physicality of an object in a meaningful way, not just a qualitative opinion ("I like the picture of the bell, it's pretty"), as well as tell stories that speak to concepts the object embodies.

Example: Object: Women's suffrage pins from 1915 which read "Liberty 1776/Justice 1915"

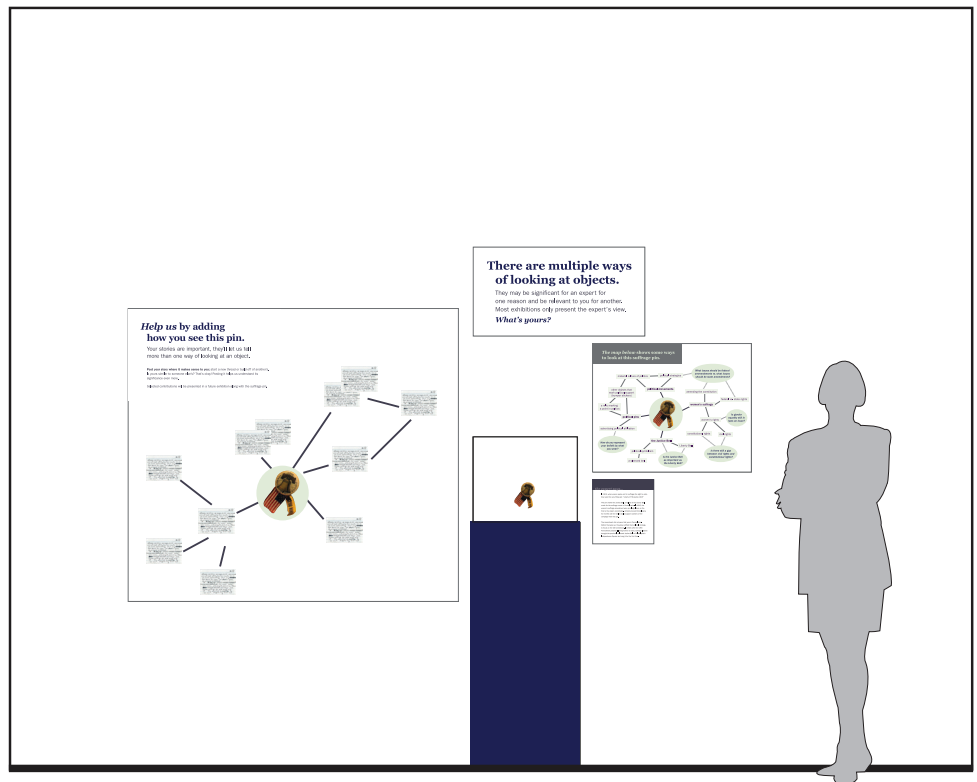
Examples contributed by participants of the application prototype testing: One respondent said she wanted to write about how we advertise political support; she was thinking of a Ralph Nader bumper sticker she has kept and the moment in political history that it marks. Another respondent said she wanted to write about the gap she

sees, as a visiting citizen from another country, between civil and constitutional rights in America.

This application adapts best practices in gathering oral histories to gathering contributions focused on an object in an exhibition space. The subject mapping of an object (referencing oral history best practices) is an important tool used to solicit contributions. The prototyped portion of the thesis application explores how thoughtful, evocative responses can be facilitated, around objects using a subject map and additional signage.

The approach of how this thesis can be applied considers the exhibition experience of the casual visitor. Steps outlined address meeting and shifting visitor expectations. Design considerations and suggestions are made throughout the application, which address the physicality of both the participatory, 'working' space, and the final exhibition. As noted previously, contributed content will be vetted then curated after it is gathered, based on the goal of presenting a conversation about an object's significance and relevance; the exhibition theme and general exhibition goals will also be considered.

Suggestions will be given to how institutions could archive to ensure that the process of gathering contributed content best serves the interpretation of the collection and enables future use of the contributions.



Suggested layout for 50 sq. ft. participatory space, further detailed starting on page 53.

The desirable outcome of this application would mimic the "Readers Write" section of *The Sun*, in which contributed content enriches the meaning of the given subject as well as support its academic definition. The contributed content gathered during the proposed process could be used in a variety of exhibitions in which objects play a role.

Taking the Approach a Step Further: The Museum as a 'Living Organism'

This thesis proposes that history museums collect, exhibit and archive contributed content with museum objects. As historical institutions, these museums charge themselves with the task of preserving and collecting a community's history: a goal this thesis hopes to address. Incorporating contributed content as a method for interpretation should be considered whenever possible for a history museum. A designated participatory, 'working', exhibition could be used to gathering content for future exhibitions.

The size of the participatory gallery could range depending on the institution's resources and needs. At maximum, a 250 sq. feet gallery would be able to gather contributions for a few objects at a time, whereas a 50 sq. foot space could be used to gather contributions for one object. The Community Gallery at the Philadelphia History Museum, an approximately 250 sq. ft space, will be used to provide a sample floorplan (below). If this is not in a separate gallery space, it could be in a transition area between larger exhibitions. Placing this participatory experience near the entrance to the museum may produce more traffic and ultimately more contributions. This approach asks that a museum devote space—which is often limited—to a participatory model. However, to again quote Daniel Spock: "if you invite people to really participate in the making of a museum, the process must change the museum" (6).

This 'working' exhibition should be designed towards a participatory experience. It should have sitting areas and writing spaces while exhibiting pre-selected objects, around which visitors can be engaged to contribute. The results of participation from within this space would then feed into larger exhibitions that are in development. A semi-permanent space circumvents the reoccurring issue of finding and designing an area to gather content for exhibitions.

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Suggested floor plan of PHM Community Gallery, detailed, page 75.

While this thesis advocates the use of contributed content as object interpretation, there may not always be a need in other exhibitions. Institutions could also explore having the participatory, 'working' exhibition be a process onto itself. Results of participation can be used in other, 'final' exhibitions, but there could also be occasions in which selected contributions are exhibited as object interpretation in the participatory space only. A draw of the 'working' exhibition is that objects will be rotated in and out. Allowing the process to also be its own exhibition enables objects to change out on a regular basis without having to fill a need in another exhibition. In either instance, this process continues to add to the interpretation of an object and the information archived; the only change would be where selected contributions are exhibited as object interpretation.

Split Second: Indian Paintings—on view July–December 2011 at the Brooklyn Museum—exhibited the study results of how an object's story influences a visitor's perception of value (of miniature Indian paintings). The process by which the museum gathered feedback and its results—in diagrams and graphs—were exhibited, rather than just artwork used for the project. Visitors were given the opportunity to participate in the exhibition as well. Much like *Split Second: Indian Paintings*, the participatory space could be an exhibition of process and provide content that addresses the unique

approach towards object interpretation. A separate space allows the museum to be clear about its premise and use of contributions without distracting from other exhibition elements.



Perspective sketch from doorway, based on Community Gallery at the Philadelphia History Museum.



Split Second: Indian Paintings. Image: Isabelle Heyward

Case by Case, an ongoing project at the San Diego Natural History Museum, is an example of a 'working' exhibit that continues to change and engage visitors in participation. *Case by Case* occupies a semi-permanent transition space. Wall text prompts visitors to ask the questions they want labels to answer. After contributions have been collected and sorted, a label is written addressing thematic groups of questions. The label is then displayed with the object as proof that the museum does, in fact, listen to the visitors. Objects are rotated in and out of the designated area (which is painted differently to distinguish it). As the project continues, returning visitors expect the participatory opportunity to be there, and check in to see how their input may have helped the writing of a label.

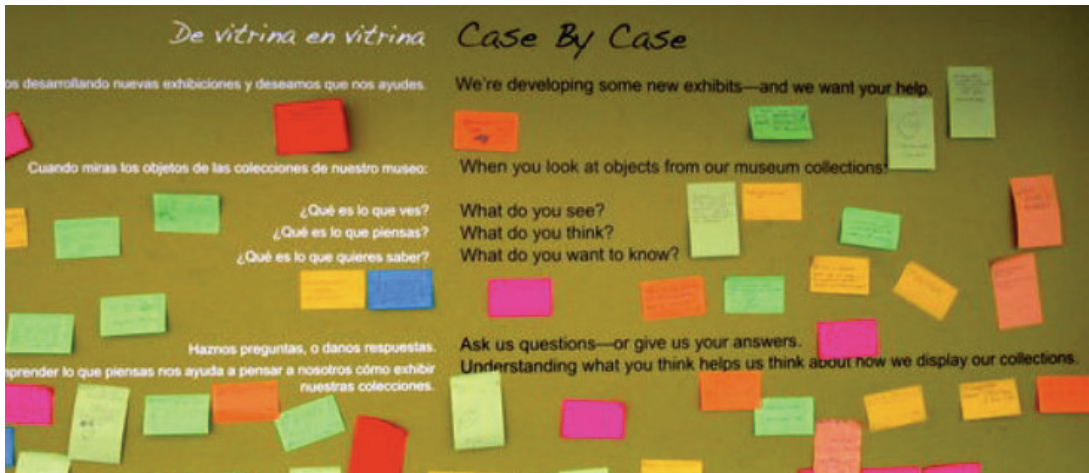
A space designated for gathering contributions conditions visitors towards a participatory experience. Upon a repeat visit, visitors expect to have the opportunity to contribute within the gallery and see the

gallery's results in exhibitions elsewhere in the museum; proof that the museum values and uses participation's results. This 'working' exhibition could act like a collaborative lab: engaging the public as active agents in presenting their community's history.

The content gathered in the proposed working exhibition can be used by interpretive developers to address themes within the object's forthcoming exhibition. Prevalent misconceptions in visitors' contributions can be addressed within labels. Along with

contributed content becoming an integrated element of interpretation, active visitor engagement helps to mold an exhibition. If this is a semi-permanent space then the use of visitor contributions could be more easily collected and implemented in a variety of exhibitions throughout the museum, rather than just one.

In an effort to balance active participation, the results of participation and continuing to present a curated learning environment, the participatory model proposed by this application would only occur in the 'working' exhibition. Results of participation would be used in the 'final' exhibition as object interpretation. Continuing participation, in terms of contributing content, in the final exhibition could put a strain on staff who would have to continue to prune contributions to make sure what is posted is focused on the subject at hand. Contributions written in the final exhibition would also never graduate to printed panels; their addition may seem unnecessary



Case by Case, photo: San Diego Natural History Museum



as the museum is already exhibiting different points of view through previously gathered contributions. Programming in the final exhibition space aims to continue public engagement.

A working exhibition that helps to provide content for other exhibitions and constantly engages the public alludes to the type of institution John Cotton Dana writes of in *The New Museum*, one that is transformed by public engagement into a 'living organism'. In effect, each exhibition in the history museum could have an aspect of a 'community exhibit', which works to present and ultimately preserve the diversity of the human experience.

Application of Thesis

Exhibition Development Process outlined by David Dean* with edits based on thesis application (191-200), proposed application steps are noted with italics.

CONCEPTUAL PHASE

Collecting ideas, comparing ideas with audience needs and the museums mission, selecting project to develop
Results: a schedule of exhibitions and identification of potential/available resources

- *The interpretive team is formed to guide and facilitate this development process.*

OPERATIONAL STAGE

Presenting the exhibition to the public on a regular basis, implementing educational programs, conducting visitor surveys, maintaining exhibition
Results: achieving exhibition goals, preventing deterioration of collections

- *Design and implement range of programming near final exhibition space, around theme of presenting multiple points of view*

TERMINATING STAGE

Dismantling the exhibition, returning objects to collection storage, documenting collection handling
Results: the exhibition ended, the collections are returned, the gallery is cleared

- *Exhibited as well as select unexhibited contributions, noted by the interpretive team during the Planning Stage, are archived.*
- *Archived contributions reference both object they were gathered for and prevalent themes throughout contributions.*

CONCEPTUAL PHASE

DEVELOPMENT PHASE

FUNCTIONAL PHASE

ASSESSMENT PHASE

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PLANNING STAGE

Setting goals for exhibition, writing narrative/interpretation, creating educational plan, designing physical exhibition
Results: an exhibition plan, education plan

- *At beginning of this phase, after exhibition themes are determined by exhibits team, objects to highlight are chosen by the interpretive team (1-3 objects depending on space of final** and 'working'*** exhibitions).*
- *After objects have been chosen, the interpretive team brainstorms a subject map (see page 58) of object(s), taking into consideration object's provenance*
- *Interpretive team creates range of questions within the subject map, meant to prompt contributions and inquiry for the visitor.*
- *Use 'working' exhibit as participatory space to gather contributions. Seed start of process.*
- *Public programming focused on gathering contributions planned*
- *Interpretive team prunes contributions posted throughout this stage, based on goal of presenting multiple points of view.*
- *At the end of the planning phase, contributions are collected and curated by the interpretive team based on the goal of exhibiting a conversation about an object. Exhibition themes and goals will also influence curation of content. Contributions should be tagged for archiving during the Terminating Stage.*

PRODUCTION STAGE

Preparing the exhibition components, mounting and installing museum objects, developing educational programs and training docents
Results: presenting the exhibition to the public, using the educational programs with the exhibitions

- *Select contributions gathered from 'working' exhibit during Planning Stage are designed into panels (or through audio guides) for the 'final' exhibition with goal of presenting multiple points of view*
- *Design of contributions in the 'final' exhibition should consider the casual visitor exhibition experience.*

Results: an evaluation report, suggested improvements to the product and the process

- *Prevalent themes of contributions are noted for future exploration.*
- *Formative evaluation of 'working' exhibit*
- *Summative evaluation of casual visitor experience of 'final' exhibition*
- *Informal summative evaluation by exhibit team, determining how/if steps of process should be tweaked moving forward*

*Dean's Exhibition Development Process was chosen to base the thesis application on because of its frequency in research. It is also not affiliated with a museum distinction and serves as a general standard.

**Final exhibition references the exhibition being developed which uses contributions gathered in the 'working' exhibition

***'Working' exhibition/exhibit references the distinct space used for gathering contributed content during the planning stage.

Application of Thesis Steps

“We want to throw the ball out there and see what comes back.”

-Luc Saunders, Assistant Editor, The Sun, 2012

CONCEPTUAL PHASE

The interpretive team is formed to guide this development process.

An interpretive team will be formed to guide and facilitate this process. Headed by the interpretive developer, who serves as the museum content expert, the team can include: educators, designers, outside experts and possibly community members. This team ensures that decisions made in presentation, curation and archiving are collaborative decisions.

DEVELOPMENT PHASE

PLANNING STAGE

At beginning of this phase, after exhibition themes are determined by exhibits team, objects to highlight are chosen by the interpretive team (1-3 objects depending on space of final and 'working' exhibitions).

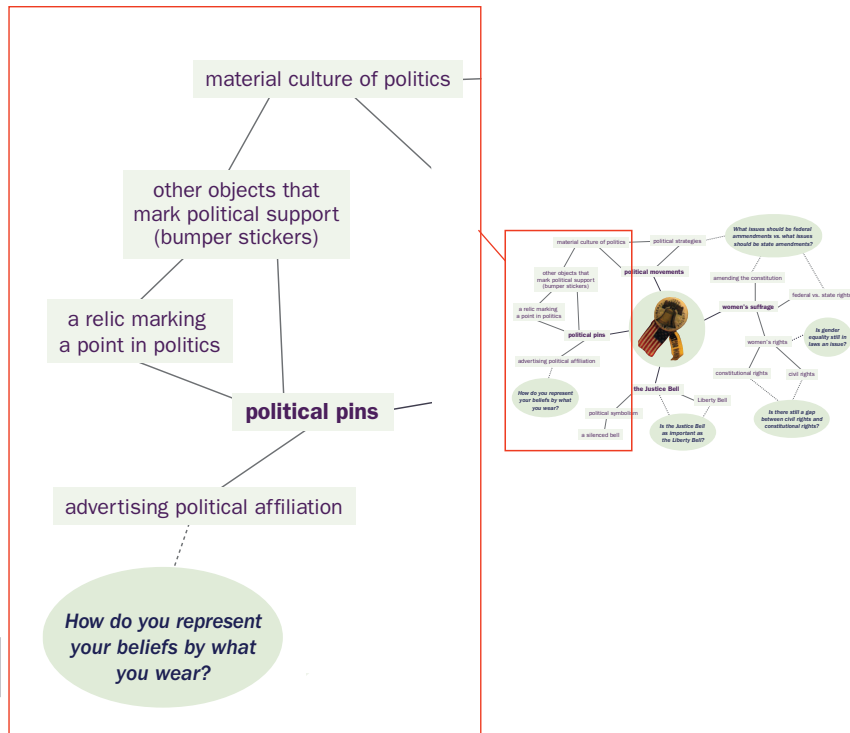
The interpretive team will choose select objects that embody the exhibition theme. Choosing objects should also consider exhibition goals developed by the exhibits team.

SHORT TERM: As noted elsewhere in this document, engaging visitors directly with objects can be difficult. While a museum is starting to use the proposed process, choosing objects with obvious meaning and implications should be considered. Using familiar objects at the start of this process could also make the participatory experience more accessible to visitors.

LONG TERM: As both the exhibit team and visitors are conditioned towards this type of participatory experience, objects with more subtle meaning could be explored. By this time, the exhibit team should have tweaked the proposed process to fit their institution and the visitors would more readily expect to engage in participation within the 'working' exhibition.

After objects have been chosen, the interpretive team brainstorms a subject map of object(s), taking into consideration the object's provenance.

The interpretive team creates a subject map of the selected object (see example on following page) based on past interpretation, provenance, research, and general understanding. Engaging a team, rather than just one person in the creation of this map will give thought tangents on the map a broader range. The subject map predicts possible ways of interpreting an object's significance. A variety of tangents should be drawn from the object, addressing both the object's physicality and concepts it embodies.

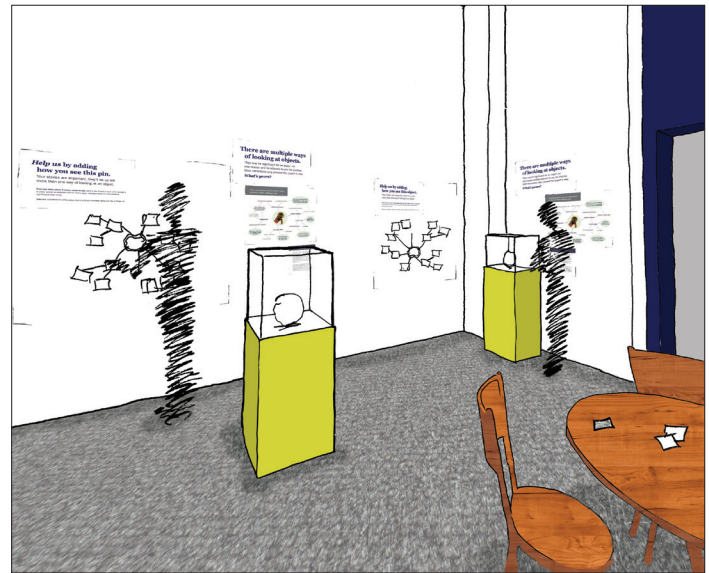


Subject Map w/detail

This thesis posits that the subject map should be exhibited along with general contribution prompts. The subject map communicates—for both the casual and participating visitor—that there are multiple ways to find significance within an object and that it is open to interpretation.

The interpretive team creates range of questions within the subject map, meant to prompt contributions and inquiry for the visitor.

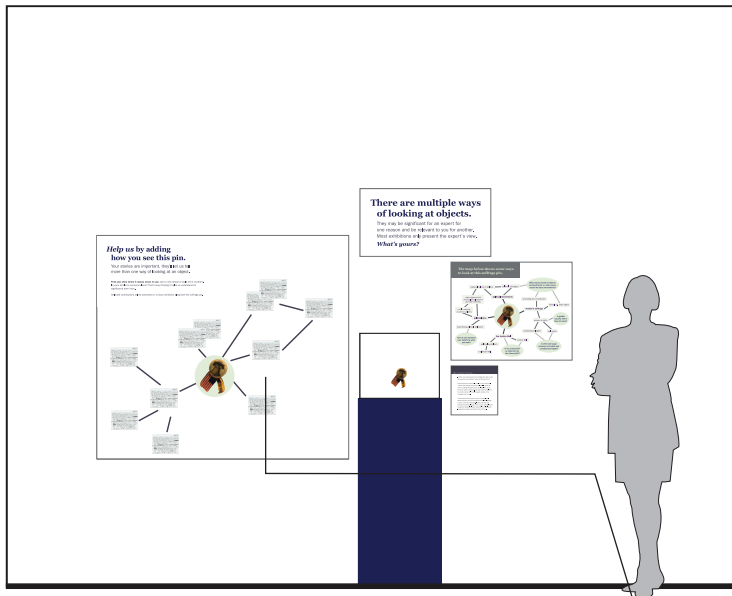
Text panels near the object provide the premise of gathering contributions. The subject map will help guide how contributions are solicited. Questions will be posed within the subject map in an effort to prompt



Perspective sketch from doorway.

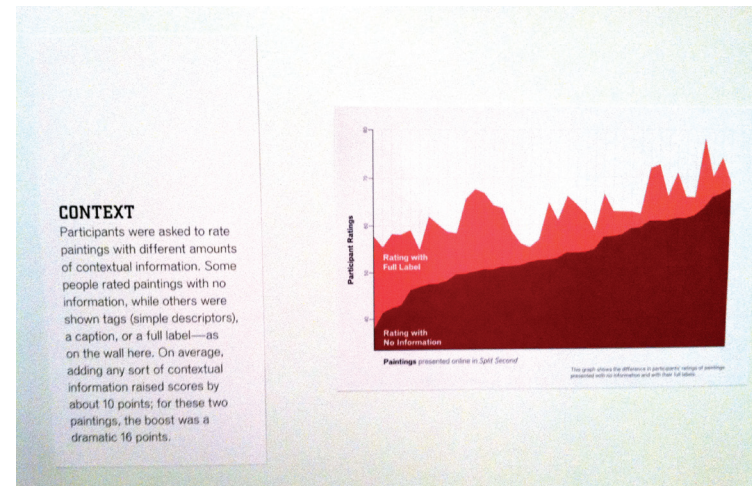
contributions and inquiry for those visitors that do not readily have an association with the object. Questions may address exhibition themes or goals, but should mostly be informed by concepts that come up through creating the map. This may seem like a structured dialog, but hopefully it will prompt a conversation about possible meanings. While not every visitor will have a relevant story to tell, presenting a subject map may engage a larger number by exhibited examples.

Questions used to prompt participation need to be provocative and broad enough to receive rich contributions. Kevin Schott, an exhibition developer at the Penn Museum, noted the different nature of contributions in two different exhibitions: *Righteous Dopefiend*, and *Imagine Africa*. Schott notes that the comments in *Righteous Dopefiend* are from personal experience and are on the whole more thoughtful, there is also a stronger sense of conversation among



Suggested wall layout for participatory experience.

comments (visitors commenting on comments, etc.). Whereas the responses the museum gets for *Imagine Africa* generally seem less engaged (fewer in number, brief, impersonal responses). Schott notes that responding within *Imagine Africa* hinges on a visitor reading the surrounding, curatorial information. If the visitor feels like participation is a test to see if they paid attention to the curatorial information, it may seem less appealing. In creating prompts, there needs to be room for people to be creative with their answers, a sentiment echoed in *The Sun's* 'Readers Write' prompt; "Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression" ('Readers Write').



Exhibited diagram, *Split Second: Indian Paintings*. Image: Isabelle Heyward

Use working' exhibit as participatory space to gather contributions. Seed start of process.

Within the 'working' exhibition, readers will write their stories and post them on the wall within a larger, blank subject map. The center of this map will be an image of the displayed object, lines branching from the center represent possible tangents. This map will initially be seeded with contributions from staff that may or may not touch on topics presented in the exhibited subject map (refer to layout sketch). The visual language of mapping thought tangents is introduced by the exhibited subject map and reinforced through posting contributions to the wall. Providing this response format allows and encourages visitors to build off others' contributions, so that a conversation around the meaning of an object is displayed within the 'working' exhibition space. Ideally the 'working' exhibition space acts as a collaborating lab where visitors engage in a dialog about the meaning of objects with each other and the museum.

There are multiple ways of looking at objects.

They may be significant for an expert for one reason and be relevant to you for another. Most exhibitions only present the expert's view.

What's yours?

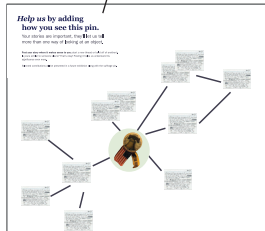
Help us by adding how you see this pin.

Your stories are important, they'll let us tell more than one way of looking at an object.

Post your story where it makes sense to you; start a new thread or build off of another's. Is yours similar to someone else's? That's okay! Posting it helps us understand its significance even more.

Selected contributions will be presented in a future exhibition along with the suffrage pin.

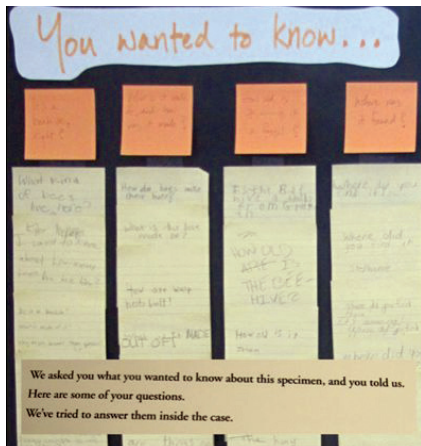
There are multiple ways of looking at objects.
This may be significant for an expert for one reason and be relevant to you for another. What's yours?



Exhibiting the subject map and allowing visitors to post contributions within a larger subject map brings scientific and anthropological aspects to the 'working' exhibition space. Similar to *Split Second: Indian Paintings*, presenting the diagrams adds a technical element that may appeal to visitors. This type of diagram exhibits how we think and make meaning in a transparent way.

Surrounding panels more generally addressing the premise of the participatory experience should communicate that contributions will be valued by the museums and can be essential to the interpretation of the collection. To form these panels, solicitations for citizen science programs should be considered: they often communicate that the data the public collects can be crucial to science. The way in which the premise of *Object Conversations* is framed will be referenced as well. 'Readers Write' prompts with "Address subjects on which you are the authority" (Readers Write), which empowers readers to contribute. Ideally, text created to prompt contributions for this application will make the participant feel confident that what they have to write is important to the museum.

The physicality of the 'working' exhibition should be designed towards participation. When possible, seating should be provided where visitors contribute to facilitate a conversation and create a physically and physiologically comfortable environment. If a larger, 250 sq. feet, space is available, other elements such as wall or signage color and lighting could be used within the gallery to create distinct areas around separate objects.



(left) Panel near case created as a result of Case by Case. Image: San Diego Natural History Museum. (right) Image from "Let's Look". Image: Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts

Engaging the public is always a wildcard, which is the beauty and downfall of co-creation in exhibitions. The development process has to be open to what might come in and assess after gathering the role that contributions will play.

Surrounding panels should also state that contributions help to interpret objects in a resulting exhibition, and be clear that not all input is used. The museum could consider exhibiting an object with contributions selected for the 'final' exhibition in printed panels, much like Case By Case exhibited the label contributions helped shape as proof that the museum was listening. This example illustrates how contributions from the participatory activity are used and valued by the museum.

Public programming focused on gathering contributions planned

Luc Saunders, Assistant Editor of *The Sun*, notes that they can only work with what they have gathered. In

the beginning, they approached staff and local writers to contribute to the 'Readers Write' section as a way to get the ball rolling. As the section has picked up momentum and readers understand the shape contributions take, they have gotten more submissions. With more submissions, they can craft a richer array of viewpoints and experiences (Phone Interview).

Museum visitors are a self-selecting audience. It is unrealistic to say that contributing visitors at a local history museum represent a cross section of the public. However, with this proposed process come opportunities in public programming to reach out to new communities. Programming can be structured around this participatory experience that can bring focus to objects from the museum's collection and more closely represent the public.

The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis is a non-collecting institution focusing on a personalized experience in the arts. Its mission includes bringing in and engaging people who are not their typical audience (Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts). Instead of a traditional education department, The Pulitzer works with the Brown School of Social Work to create programming that connects diverse social groups. An example is "Let's Look", a program that brings adults with early stage Alzheimer's together with local elementary school children to experience the Foundation's Old Masters Collection (The Pulitzer Foundation of the Arts). Lisa Harper Chang, Community Programs Director, states that their main goal in programming is to build "a more

inclusive society that celebrates diversity through appreciation of creativity" (Email Interview).

Through programming, a history museum could reach out to people who are not in their typical audience to contribute in creative ways, so that a broader cross-section of the public could be represented in contributions. Exhibiting diverse voices from within the community aids in the exhibition experience as a sociological event. It gets closer to *The Sun's* mission of presenting the "diversity of the human experience" (*The Sun*). Taking a similar approach to programming as The Pulitzer would also enable the museum to archive contributions that better represent the community at that point in time.

SHORT TERM: Engage museum's existing audience within gallery and through museum's online presence. Create school programs and tours either based on or including this participatory experience.

LONG TERM: Create programming both in and outside the museum that reaches out to diverse groups from the surrounding community (residents of elder-care facilities, prisoners, high schoolers, ethnic groups, etc.)

Prune contributions posted throughout this stage, based on goal of presenting multiple points of view.

During the participatory process, members of the interpretive team should take down written contributions that are superfluous or off topic to

keep what is posted focused.

The team should prune posted contributions based on the goal of presenting multiple points of view. Clarity in terms of what is legible should also be considered. However, the team should not exercise strict control over posted contributions in this space, in an effort to retain a collaborative feeling.

At the end of the planning phase, contributions are collected and curated by the interpretive team based on the goal of exhibiting a conversation about an object. Exhibition themes and goals will also influence curation of content. Contributions should be tagged for archiving during the terminating stage.

Results from the front-end visitor survey conducted for this thesis showed that respondents want to see focused contributions that relate to what they are seeing. Respondents also stated that they wanted the additional interpretation only if it would help them understand an object. Respondents explicitly stated that they did not want to see superfluous contributions that pertain to opinions (ex: "I like this because..."), they felt that these would detract from their exhibition experience.

The interpretive team should select contributions to be exhibited with objects; not all contributed content should be presented in an exhibition. The theme and goal of the exhibition should be considered when curating contributions. They aim to create and exhibit

a conversation around an object that represents varied viewpoints. Contributions will most likely fall into thematic groups, which should be represented in the final exhibition.

Contributions may represent misconceptions regarding the object; in this case, exhibit staff should consider addressing these misconceptions in exhibition panels in the resulting exhibition.

As the interpretive team selects contributions to be exhibited, they should tag, or note which should be later archived during the terminating stage. This uses the general examination of contributions needed to determine which should be exhibited to also serve the later task of archiving.

The resulting nature of contributions is somewhat unpredictable, so exact guidelines need to be developed by the interpretive team on a per-project basis. Archived contributions should be chosen on their interpretive strength as determined by the team. Basic guidelines for archiving to be considered would be: those contributions exhibited or nearly exhibited; contributions that represent diversity in experience, culture or background; and contributions that address subjects not called out on the subject-map created during the planning stage of exhibition development.

PRODUCTION STAGE

Select contributions gathered from 'working' exhibit during Planning Stage are designed into panels (or through audio guides) for the 'final' exhibition with goal of presenting multiple points of view.

Contributed content gathered from the working exhibition space during the development phase will be exhibited in the final exhibition, adding interpretation around objects. Design of the final exhibition space should work to create a conversation around objects, so that it is clear to the visitor that multiple sources of interpretation are represented. Content from the museum expert, in which the scholarship of the institution is evident, should still be a focus in the design around the object. This aims to meet the expectations of visitors who seek scholarship when visiting the museum. Authorship should be noted on panels as well, so that it is clear which content is coming from the museum expert, and which is coming from the public.

How contributions are designed into the exhibition experience ultimately varies on the exhibition at hand. The previously stated general goals should be addressed, however, each exhibition design will vary. How contributed content is displayed in the 'final' exhibition space should be prototyped. Formative evaluations should be conducted assessing the effect on the casual visitor experience. Ideally, the addition of contributed content does not detract from the perceived scholarship of the institution, but enriches it with multiple viewpoints.

Design of contributions in the 'final' exhibition should consider the casual visitor exhibition experience.

The materiality of contributions can communicate the value a museum places on them. By exhibiting contributed content within graphic panels, the casual visitor can see that contributions have been reviewed by the museum. Front-end survey respondents stated that this was key to their acceptance of contributed content in an exhibition.

In terms of driving visitors towards participation, respondents of the front-end survey stated they would feel more inclined to participate if contributions were presented on text panels (73%) versus (37%) who stated the hand-written cards would prompt them. The participatory (working exhibition) space will only have hand-written contributions; contributed content graduates to graphic panels when it is selected for use in the final exhibition spaces. The museum should consider exhibiting the contributions selected to exhibit with the object in the 'working' space before moving to the final exhibition.

An alternate or supplementary approach to exhibiting contributed content would be using it within an audio tour. The different medium may effectively delineate the content sources for the visitor (curatorial content is on the wall, contributed content is through an audio device). Using audio also allows the emotive affect of public contributions to be reflected in the medium.

FUNCTIONAL PHASE

OPERATIONAL STAGE

Design and implement range of programming near final exhibition space, around theme of presenting multiple points of view.

Programming should continue to be a large element in the operational stage of this exhibition. By this time, the exhibition is in the 'final' exhibition space and the object presented with additional contributed interpretations is just one, among other, exhibited objects. Opportunities lie here to engage visitors and the greater public in considering what other alternate stories can be told within the final exhibition. Programming can also include opportunities for the public to bring in their own objects that address the exhibition theme. Programming can bring together the curators and the public, creating a dialog about museum objects.

The final exhibition presents a conversation about the significance and relevance of objects, which represents varied sources. However, all those contributions are gathered in the participatory, 'working' exhibition. Programming allows the final exhibition to continue to actively engage the public.

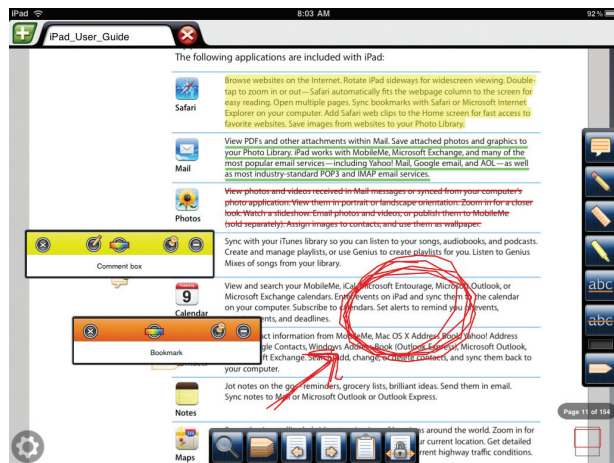
TERMINATING STAGE

Exhibited as well as select unexhibited contributions, noted by the interpretive team during the planning stage, are archived.

The interpretative team should note contributions

at the end of the planning stage, both exhibited and unexhibited, that should be archived during this time.

Contributions that are exhibited as well as select others should be archived by the museum. Ideally they will be preserved in a digital format that can be searched in the future, though available resources can hamper archiving efforts. Megan Good, Director of the J. Welles Henderson Archives & Library at the Independence Seaport Museum, is not given a budget for digitization, yet the majority of the Library's flat files are not in a digital format. Good uses smart phone applications (either free or of a very minimal cost) to scan and archive collections. This approach can also be adapted for digitizing and archiving select contributed content.



Screen shot of iPad iAnnotate application. Image: Tablet Legal.

(Smart phone and ipad applications are developed quickly, those specified are available at the time of this project, and merely serve as examples of the possibilities.)

One application, Genius Scan, is free and can be used to scan documents with a smart phone or ipad's camera. The resulting image can be enhanced within the application (color correction, contrast, etc.) and saved as a PDF. From there, the PDF can either be emailed, uploaded to DropBox, or the user can open up another smart phone or ipad application to annotate the file. In two different applications (among others), neu.annotate and iAnnotate, the user can add text to the PDF. The additional text could note date, object accession number the contribution was gathered around, as well as other, basic information. iAnnotate enables users to free highlight PDFs, so that attention can be drawn to key elements. The resulting PDF can be read by both PC and Mac's in PDF reading software. After the annotated PDF has been created, an accession form can be added to the contribution, providing additional information such as general subject covered as well as themes of other contributions so researching in the future can be accommodated. Subject tags can be added to the accession form to facilitate future reference.

Staff time and resources often deter institutions from archiving contributed content. While the suggested smart phone and ipad applications require those devices to be accessible, using them is one approach to archiving contributed content.

Archived contributions reference both object they were gathered for and other themes represented by other contributions.

Archived contributions should reference the object's accession number for which they were gathered. They should also reference any noted themes in other contributions. Noting other themes allows a future researcher to quickly understand all the (basic) ways the object was interpreted. All contributed content themes should also be noted on the object's information file. Minimal on-file interpretation is not unusual for collections, this process adds to the interpretation available for objects.

ASSESSMENT PHASE:

Prevalent themes of contributions are noted for future exploration.

If a large number of contributions touch on the same theme, the museum could consider noting this for future exploration.

Formative evaluation of 'working' exhibit.

The participatory, 'working' exhibition should be evaluated to assess if the signage presented communicates: that there are multiple ways to see and interpret an object, and that selected contributions are valued by the museum and will aid in interpreting objects in future exhibitions. Formative evaluations should also assess if visitors feel comfortable—both physically and psychologically—

contributing in the exhibition. Since this is an on-going participatory space, evaluating this space will probably take the form of tracking and exit interviews.

Summative evaluation of casual visitor experience of 'final' exhibition.

The casual visitor experience is of primary concern for this thesis. Summative evaluations and tracking could be used to assess how the casual visitor experiences the addition of contributed content in an object-based exhibition. Points to note in evaluation could be: if contributed content affects the perceived scholarship of the exhibition, and if the addition of contributed content prompted visitors to see the object with added context.

Informal summative evaluation of process by exhibit team, determining how/if process should be tweaked moving forward.

Exhibition teams should informally evaluate the development process after the 'final' exhibition closes. Every object and exhibition is different. Each time this process is implemented by a museum, it should inform the next round of gathering and exhibiting contributions. The museum should be open to adjusting and changing this model moving forward, based on their needs and goals.

Application Prototype Approach + Methodology

APPROACH

The prototyped portion of the thesis application explores how thoughtful, evocative responses can be facilitated, using an object as a catalyst. The solicitation for contributed content during the development phase was tested for this thesis. Due to resources and time available, only the prompts and signage associated with asking visitors to contribute were tested.

This thesis posits that prompts for participation must communicate trust, value, and how contributions will be used. The proposed application prompts reference project descriptions of *Object Conversations* as well as citizen science calls to action like the one from the Museum of Science, Boston. Content accompanying prompts aims to communicate that contributions are necessary for the interpretation of the object in a future exhibition and help the museum understand its collection.

Testing this application also assesses the effect of exhibiting a subject map of the object (an adaptation of oral history best practices). Oral history practices are used because they aim to gather personal stories that enrich traditional scholarship, much like an overall goal for this thesis in presenting contributed content. This thesis posits that exhibiting the subject map illustrates that there are many ways to understand an object and could prompt visitors to not only identify how they can, but also to contribute those stories.

METHODOLOGY

The application was tested in the current Community Gallery space at the Philadelphia History Museum, on March 24th and 27th, 2012. This space has also been used for a proposed floor plan and wall layout, located on page 75. A suffrage pin, already on display in this gallery, was chosen to prototype the contribution prompts. The object's current exhibition status facilitated prototyping; however, the pin shared a vitrine with two object of unrelated to women's suffrage. It should be recognized that the suffrage pin is an engendered object; testing was conducted with both male and female participants.

Only one object was used to prototype the contribution prompts to streamline testing and produce more succinct responses. An additional object considered was a sewing machine, brought to Philadelphia by Russian immigrants in 1951. While this object contained an interesting story about immigration, assimilation, and family relics, its placement in another gallery was not as conducive to testing.

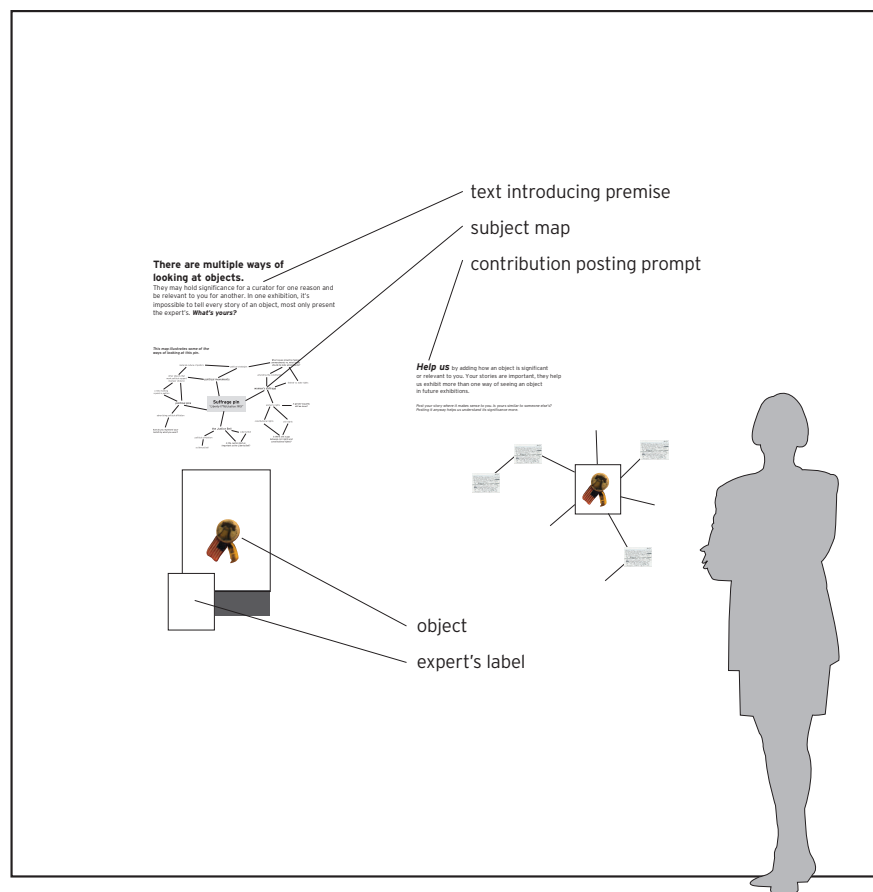
Once the pin was chosen, I visited the Philadelphia History Museum (PHM) collections facility to gather the object's information file, which offered only the date and a very basic description. Minimal on-file interpretation is not unusual for collections. Selecting the pin to prototype this application highlights the benefit of gathering additional interpretation and illustrates how the application can be approached starting with a minimum amount of information.

I interviewed an on-staff curator about the object and conducted further research on key points covered. Based on the conversation with the curator and research, I wrote an approximately 100-word label that represented the expert's content for testing. The written label was then reviewed by the on-staff curator. (There is currently only a one-line description of the suffrage pin on exhibit, which was restated at the beginning of the label.)

Based on the curator interview and further research, I created a subject map of possible concept tangents that could stem from the pin. The subject map created for prototyping includes questions aimed to prompt contributions further or at least make the casual visitor consider different ways of seeing the significance or relevance of the object.

The prototype sessions conducted tested how participants responded to the exhibition of the subject mind map, general contribution prompts, and assessed if using contributions in a future exhibition altered the nature of contributions. Participants were shown a panel introducing the premise, a subject map for the pin, the curatorial (labeled as expert's) content label, and the additional contribution prompt on a larger subject map on which contributions are posted (refer to diagram,

below). Subject maps and all other copy presented in this draft were shown to participants as printouts which were affixed to the wall above and beside the object case.



Prototyped layout. Object was in large wall-mount case with two other objects.

After participants spent time reviewing the object and all supplied signage, they were individually interviewed about their experiences. The following questions were asked: (demographic information beyond gender was not be recorded as this is qualitative data).

- *What do you think the point of experience is?*
- *What do you think the point of the map is?*
- *Did you find any of the text confusing?*
- *Why do you think a museum would be interesting in a contributed story?*
- *What would make you more likely to contribute a story?*
- *Do you feel that, if you were to contribute, what you had to write would be valued by the museum?*
- *Do you think you will remember anything from this experience?*

After questioning, I led a more casual conversation with all participants, discussing the goals of the signage and how the presented materials can best achieve those goals.

Prototyped Materials

Signage on the following pages was tested with focus groups on March 24th and 27th, 2012; signs revised between testing are noted. Final signage reflecting the results of testing starts on page 78.

There are multiple ways of looking at objects.

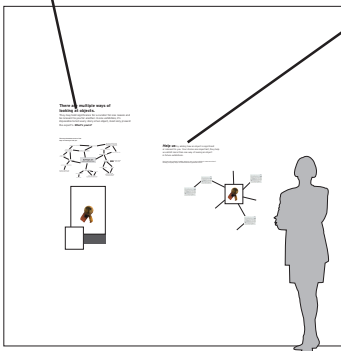
They may hold significance for a curator for one reason and be relevant to you for another. It's impossible to tell every story around an object in an exhibition, most only present the expert's view.

What's yours?

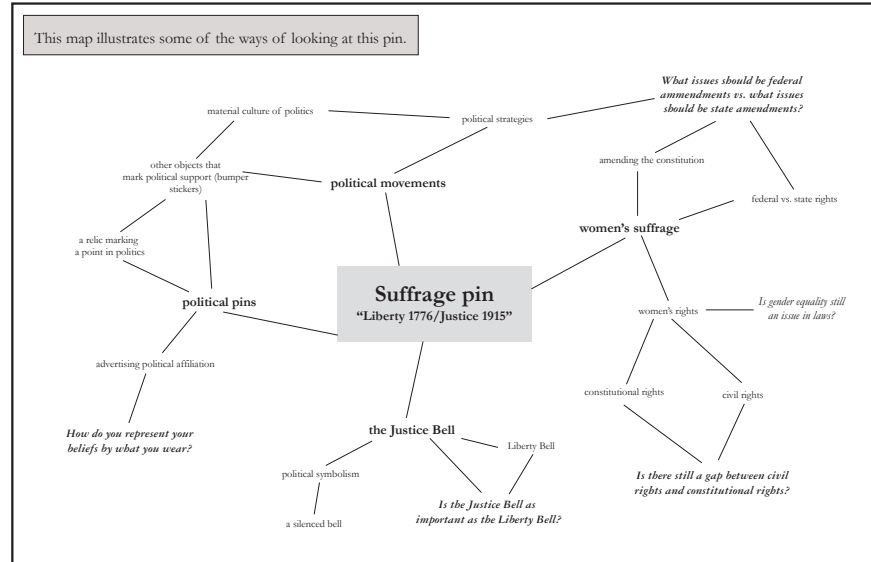
Help us by adding what you see when you look at this pin.

Your stories are important, they help us show more than one way of looking at an object in future exhibitions.

*Post your story where it makes sense to you. Is yours similar to someone else's? That's okay!
Posting it helps us understand its significance even more.*

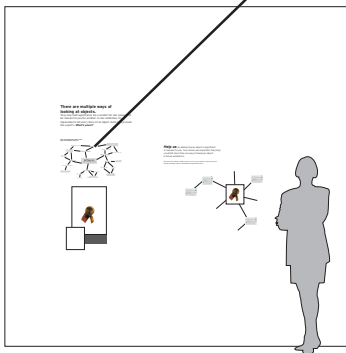
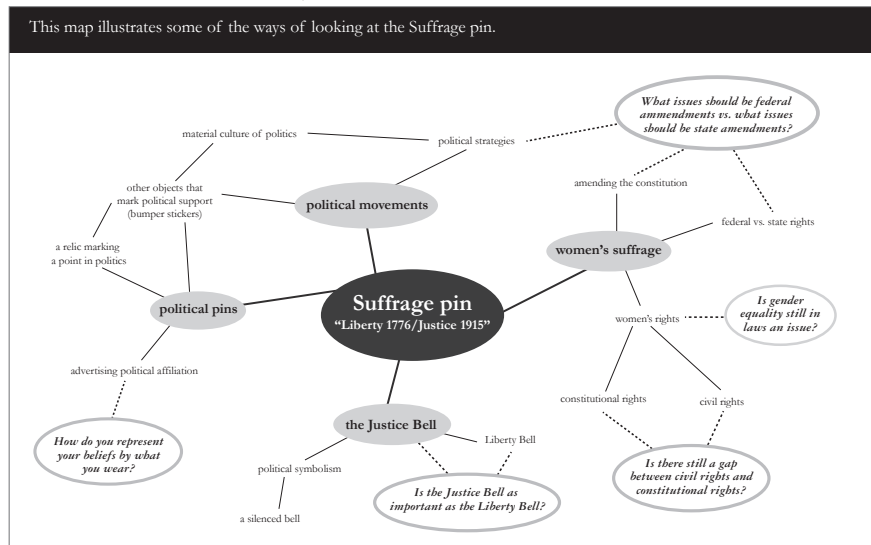


Tested March 24, 2012.



71

Tested March 27, 2012. Revised from previous test based on feedback.



Tested March 24, 2012.

the expert says...

**In 1915, when women spoke out for suffrage
(the right to vote), they wore this very fitting pin:
“Liberty 1776/Justice 1915”**

This pin shows the Justice Bell, a replica of the Liberty Bell made for the suffrage cause in Pennsylvania. In 1915, the women’s suffrage amendment was up in legislature as the first to the state’s constitution. Activists toured Pennsylvania for months with the bell to build support; backers of the campaign wore this pin.

The amendment did not pass that year in Pennsylvania. Rather than give up, the group shifted their political strategy to focus on the US Constitution. In 1920, after the 19th Amendment passed (allowing women to vote), suffrage leaders brought the previously silenced Justice Bell to Philadelphia’s Independence Square and rang it for the first time.

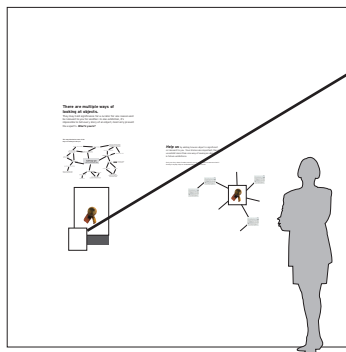
Tested March 27, 2012. Revised from previous test based on feedback.

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**In 1915, when women spoke out for Suffrage
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Prototype Conclusions

There were five attendants to the two scheduled focus groups. While this is a small number, the feedback was very consistent person-to-person and clearly highlighted strengths and areas for improvement in terms of what was tested.

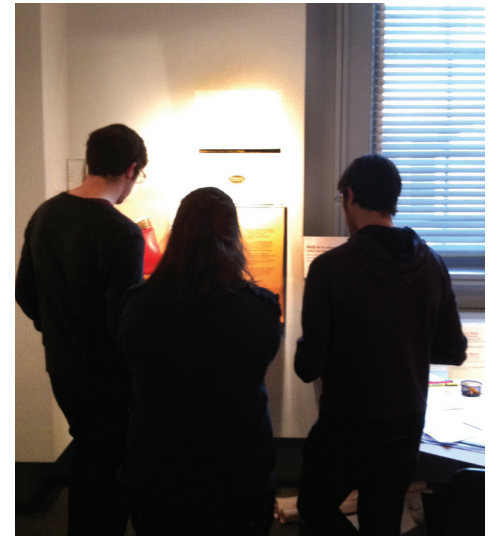
Ultimately, two main ideas were tested: exhibiting a subject map to illustrate that there are a variety of ways to look at and interpret an object and using it to solicit contributions; and that the museum values and will use selected contributions in a future exhibition. Every respondent understood the concept of the subject map and responded favorably to its exhibition. In general, respondents did not feel that the signage tested clearly communicated that contributions could be used in a future exhibition to interpret objects. (Though they responded to how this communication would affect their contributions.)

More than half the respondents said that the subject map and the expert's label worked well together: each supplying context for the other. The label gave a thorough take on one interpretation, but the map broadened their understanding of how it could be interpreted. This echoes Frisch's sentiment that subjects develop a "new sharpness and focus through the combination" of oral histories and scholarly research (Introduction).

Exhibiting the subject map while prompting contributions produced the ideal responses. Every respondent understood the concept of the subject map, that it illustrated different ways of seeing and interpreting the object. One respondent said that it provided her "more

places to touch down [than only an expert's label could]" and understand how she could see the object. This is important in considering the casual visitor experience of the participatory space. Regardless of whether a visitor contributes, the map prompts inquiry and meaning-making. The responses to the subject map were very consistent; however, there should be further testing with more people.

The general prompt (not questions within the subject map) and introductory panel need to clearly communicate that: this exercise is asking for visitors to contribute—the "what's yours?" prompt at the end of the top panel was generally missed; and, that the contributions may be used in graphic panels in future exhibitions. In terms of the entire space, how all signage elements work together with the object should be carefully considered and prototyped further. It should also be clearly communicated that the gallery is a changing space and objects will be rotating in and out every few months. This is an important factor in considering repeat visitation



Prototyping group, March 27th.

Respondents varied on whether they would contribute. Two of the five respondents were immediately prompted by questions within the subject map and knew what they would contribute. Both noted that as they considered the entire map, they thought of other stories they could contribute. Another person wanted to contribute based on the information within the map, not a question prompt. One person was clear that he would never respond, but liked the presentation overall and particularly liked the way the map “provided fodder” about “what [the pin] could represent” for him (respondent 4).

Several respondents said that they would consider what they were writing more if they knew the museum was going to possibly use it in future exhibitions: the ideal response for this thesis. “I would be more thoughtful with what I wrote, it wouldn’t just be an impression... I feel more commitment; my mind hasn’t changed in terms of what I would say, just the kind of attention I can give changes” (respondent 1). Another respondent was very clear in stating that he rarely contributes and if he does, it is only to give a superfluous opinion (ex: that he likes something). In referencing the front-end study conducted for this thesis, these types of qualitative opinions are ultimately what casual visitors are uninterested in seeing. This same respondent stated that seeing or knowing that contributions could be used in an exhibition would give the participatory act more gravity and would deter him from writing an inconsequential statement; however, if he did have something to contribute, he would consider what he was writing more. This same respondent noted that

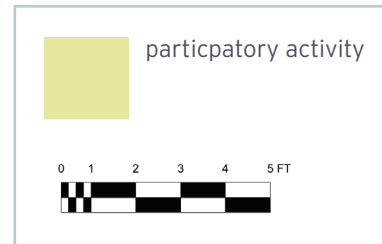
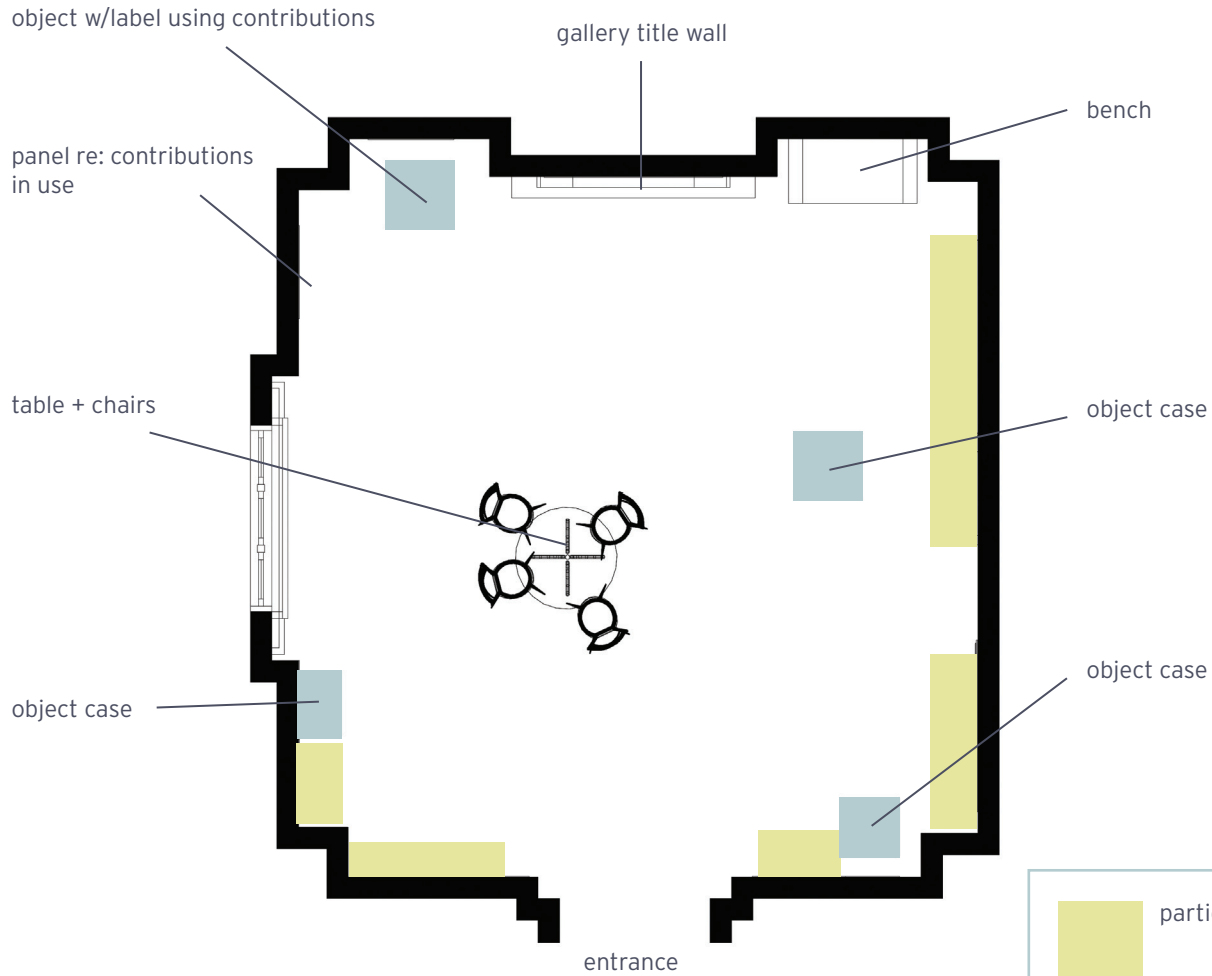
post-its and sticky notes were such temporary mediums that he wouldn’t take the contributing process seriously unless it was clear the museum was going to use what he had to say.

Moving forward, how evocative, thoughtful contributions are solicited should be further tested. The wording of prompts presented in this thesis will aim to more clearly convey the purpose of soliciting contributions. Exhibiting the subject map to prompt contributions produced the ideal feedback and supported the research portion of this project.

On a whole, all respondents felt the sense of community engagement from a museum soliciting content. They understood that this participatory experience is about people connecting around an object. The participatory model proposed by this thesis aims to present the diversity of the visitor experience through object interpretation in both the working and final exhibition. Both spaces address a visitor motivation to engage in a meaningful social experience (Falk, 64).

I see this application working in museums other than those of local contemporary history and hope to continue to explore this subject and this application moving forward in my career.

Recommended Floor Plan + Sketches





Perspective sketch from entrance.



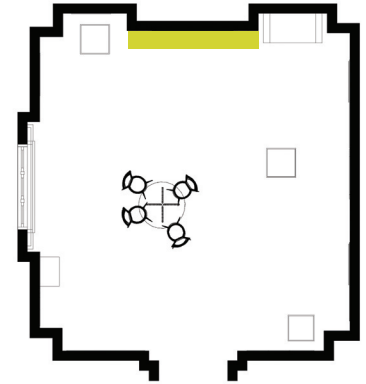
Perspective sketch from back corner.

Recommended Gallery Signage

TITLE WALL TEXT

GOALS

- Let visitors know that this is a changing space: object rotate out every couple of months.
- Clearly state that the gallery aims to show that there are many ways to interpret objects.
- Clearly communicate that the gallery is a collaborative space where participation aids in interpreting objects throughout the museum.
- Communicate that the museum values and can need the results of participation.



Welcome to the
community gallery,
{a changing, collaborative space.}

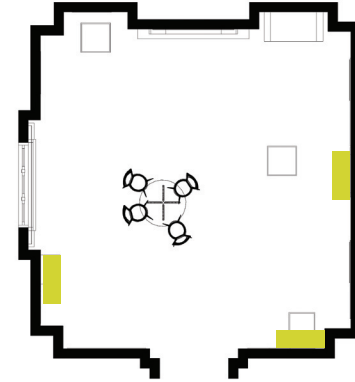
We're developing some new exhibits and need your help.

The objects in this gallery—which change every few months—will be used in upcoming exhibitions. Objects hold many stories; it's impossible to tell all of them in an exhibition. With your collaboration, we will be able to exhibit different ways to find an object important, as well as the expert's.

GENERAL CONTRIBUTION PANEL AND PROMPT

GOALS

- Communicate that there are multiple ways of seeing objects and museums usually only show the expert's
- Introduce, with reference to the object, the premise of visitors contributing to help the museum tell more than one object story in an exhibition.



There are multiple ways of looking at objects.

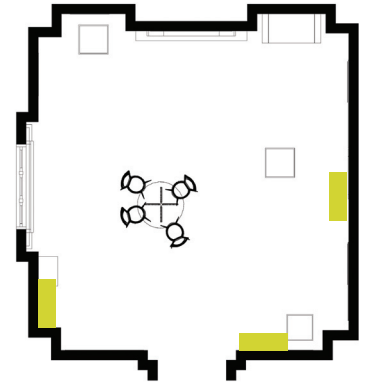
They may be significant for an expert for one reason and be relevant to you for another. Most exhibitions only present the expert's view.

What's yours?

SUBJECT MAP

GOALS

- Communicate that there are multiple ways of seeing objects; the map shows some, but not all, the ways for a visitor can make meaning of an object
- Prompts and tangents within the map supply fodder for how casual visitors can make meaning of the object, and ways in which participants can contribute.



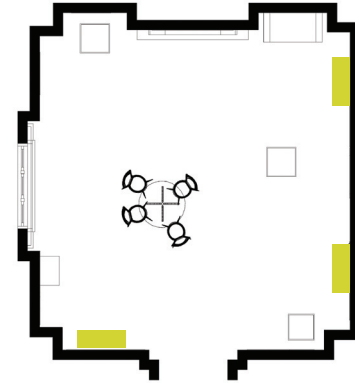
The map below shows some ways to look at this suffrage pin.



CONTRIBUTION POSTING PROMPT/ VISITOR CREATED SUBJECT MAP PANEL

GOALS

- Communicate that the museum values contributions and needs them to exhibit multiple points of view (in an upcoming exhibition).
- To convivially encourage visitors to post contributions into a format that mimics the subject map also on display.



Help us by adding how you see this pin.

Your stories are important, they'll let us tell more than one way of looking at an object.

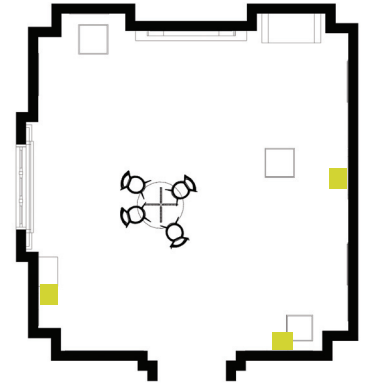
Post your story where it makes sense to you; start a new thread or build off of another's. Is yours similar to someone else's? That's okay! Posting it helps us understand its significance even more.

Selected contributions will be presented in a future exhibition along with the suffrage pin.

EXPERT'S LABEL

GOAL

- To clearly show that this content is coming from the museum expert. (This continues to be a goal in the 'final' exhibition content is being gathered for.)



the expert says...

In 1915, when women spoke out for suffrage (the right to vote), they wore this very fitting pin: "Liberty 1776/Justice 1915"

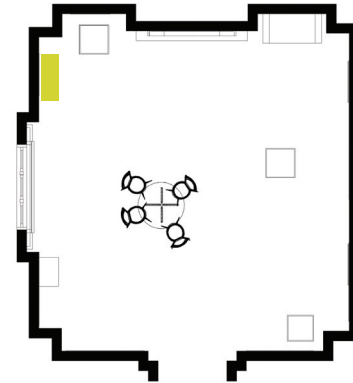
This pin shows the Justice Bell, a replica of the Liberty Bell made for the suffrage cause in Pennsylvania. In 1915, the women's suffrage amendment was up in legislature as the first to the state's constitution. Activists toured Pennsylvania for months with the bell to build support; backers of the campaign wore this pin.

The amendment did not pass that year in Pennsylvania. Rather than give up, the group shifted their political strategy to focus on the US Constitution. In 1920, after the 19th Amendment passed (allowing women to vote), suffrage leaders brought the previously silenced Justice Bell to Philadelphia's Independence Square and rang it for the first time.

EXAMPLE OF CONTRIBUTIONS IN USE PANEL

GOALS

- To show, by example, that the museum values the results of participation and will use it in exhibition.
- To convey that exhibiting contributed content shows that there are different ways to make meaning of an object.
- To give insight into how contributed content is curated to exhibit a conversation around an object.
- Communicate that contributions help a museum by adding to the information on file for an object (and can be useful in the future).



As you see to the right, contributions posted in this gallery help us tell some of the stories this object can hold. Stories were carefully selected to show a conversation about how we (museum and visitors alike) can find an object important.

Your contributions may add to our archives: allowing researchers in the future to more fully understand objects, and how we're thinking, as a community, at this point in time.

appendix

MUSEUM PROFESSIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Public contribution: Content that is contributed by the general public which comes in the form of stories connected to/inspired by museum's objects. How and what visitors can contribute is inspired by not only the objects but provocative questions posed by the museum. This content does not have to be encumbered by historical significance recognized by a museum.

Question 1

- A. Do you personally value contributed content from the general public in exhibitions?** *(Scale of 1-5, 1=not at all, 5=value very much)*
- B. Specifically adapted for an object-based History Museum?** *(Scale of 1-5, 1=not at all, 5=value very much)*
- C. Please explain your scores.**

Question 2

- A. If you agree some form of public contribution is important, do you think museums should archive this public interpretation?** *(Scale of 1-5, 1=should not archive at all, 5=this interpretation should definitely be archived)*
- B. Please explain your scores.**

Question 3

- A. Do you think these forms of contributions could add relevance and significance to object-based exhibitions?** *(Scale of 1-5, 1=they would add nothing, 5=they would add more than just curatorial content could)*
- B. If so, how?**

Question 4

- A. Do you think "public contributions" add value to the visitor's experience of museum objects?**
- B. Why or why not?**

Question 5

When you are a visitor at a state or local history museum, what kind of experience are you looking for *(choose all that apply):*

- a. I want to learn cold hard facts about history! (dates, names, event, etc.)
 - b. I want to get an overall sense of the importance of objects displayed and their relationship to history
 - c. I primarily visit exhibitions with friends and family and/or to be in a museum setting, so the subject and content is secondary.
 - d. I want to know why the objects are important enough to be in a museum exhibition
 - e. I want to understand how these objects relate to me
 - f. I want to know how the object was discovered or preserved
- Other:

Question 6

What type of institution do you work for currently?

Question 7

- A. What is your role in that institution?**
- B. How do you think a development process, which includes public contributions, would affect your process/job duties?**

Museum Professional Survey Result Summary

Ten museums professionals either affected by the exhibitions development process or extremely familiar with it were surveyed. The goal of this qualitative survey was to understand limitations and opportunities from the field's perspective. Demographics were not recorded, rather type of institution and job role.

Bulleted answers represent responses that occurred in more than one survey. Number of respondents that answered similarly is noted in parentheses.

(Question 1) The majority of those surveyed stated that they very much value public contributions in exhibitions and in an object-based exhibition at a history museum.

A primary concern in how public contributions are valued is:

- There better be a good reason it's there for the visitors who are not contributing. (2)
- This is only good if you're adding relevance to the material by having contemporary contributions. (2)

Positive responses for the use of public contributions in exhibitions:

- Everyone who comes in has knowledge only one person can have. (3)
- The message is that history is not a closed book, if people think it's closed, it's not as engaging for all of us—visitors and museum professionals. (4)
- There are ways to improve visitor interactions with objects. (3)
- It's about how we—museum professionals—interpret objects vs. how visitors interpret objects. It's a different way to capture what people are

thinking/how they're responding to objects. (3)

- It can create more questions and not just provide answers like exhibitions normally do. (2)
- This adds an emotional layer. (2)

(Question 2) The question of whether or not public contributions should be archived met a more neutral, yet still largely positive response.

It is important to archive:

- If it's archived, museum professionals can go back and analyze it. (4)
- It's useful to interpretation approached down the road. (3)
- It makes what people were thinking at a point in time. (3)

It is not important to archive:

- The format is key for why it should/if it can be archived. (2)
- This would drag out the process if it had to happen. (2)
- Not all of them can be archived, what's the process for deciding this? (2)

(Question 3) All respondents answered believe public contributions could add relevance to an object-based exhibition, though there were some concerns.

Negative/skeptical:

- With caveat that it depends on how it's done. (2)
- This creates more archival work. (3)

Positive:

- It adds to the message that it's open. (2)
- It makes the experience more dynamic. (5)
- It could contribute to understanding historical experiences. (3)
- They could if the contributions are curated. (2)

(Question 4) When asked if public contributions add value to the visitor experience of objects, the majority of answers were positive, while a few were skeptical.

Why does it add value?

- Adds more stories and/or perspectives. (6)
- It's a public way of aiding in the understanding of a collection. (3)
- People want something meaningful and relevant. (5)
- It's not just about context, it's a connection. (2)

Why not?

- It would be cluttered if it was for every object. (2)
- When the contributions are random/off topic, it doesn't help, add value to experience. (2)

(Question 7) The following points summarize how an exhibition development process that includes public contributions would affect respondents' role/job position. Note that three out of the ten respondents stated that their role would not change with this inclusion as it's already a consideration.

- You would have to plan for this process/incorporate time in the schedule in planning to accommodate.
- This sounds like it would take audience research/ focus groups.

- The curator is still playing a role in what the visitors see.
- The curator acts as facilitator, they are still directing, but understands that there are multiple viewpoints.
- This is a way of sharing authority and sharing the floor.
- There should always be something unexpected [in exhibitions].
- This will add time to the process, but also add a layer of emotional resonance that's not possible otherwise.
- Public and visitor-centered approaches permit us to broaden our reach into new constituencies and more appropriately represent our communities.
- Roles will include curating responses.
- This would add a new process but would not change the job of exhibition developer job that much.
- This process would require additional resources and would be problematic for smaller institutions.
- This would be adding another element to the exhibition process would be difficult due to the lack of staff and the time constraints.
- It's a lot of work so they wouldn't be able to do it regularly and it would be impossible for them to archive.

MUSEUM PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESULT MATRIX

Survey #	1A	1B	1C	2A	2B	3A	3B	4A	4B	5	6	7A	7B
1- Exhibition Developer, Natural History Museum	3	3	-would want the content to be engaging. There better be a strong reason its there for every one else	5	-when its archive, museum professionals can go back and analyze it -someone 10 years from now might want to see that this is how people reacted, it's a way to follow trends and assumptions -with [a central, outdated exhibition], we have no record of what people liked and that at the time of the opening	5	-with the caution that it depends on how that's done. People react to history strongly and so to have an oral history section that supplements a history book adds dimension to the story. -unsure of how this would work at a natural history museum because not everyone can be the expert on natural history or science, and the curators don't want to relinquish that authority	yes	it can add more stories and/or perspectives	b, e, f	b	Exhibition Developer	-this would be about understanding where it would make sense in a natural history museum -I don't know how this would affect me. You'd have to plan for this process, in natural history museums, visitors are not the experts on artifacts but that doesn't mean there isn't a place for it.
2- Head of Exhibitions, History Museum	5	5	-traditional history museums is the prime place for visitor contributed content b/c it is the story of us -everyone who comes in has knowledge that only one person cannot have regarding history -they get contributions from visitors even when it's not solicited -this is important because if people come in and think the book is closed it's not as engaging and it's NOT for all of us (it is and should be)	3	-'digital' is the clincher for this in terms of if it should go into the collection. And it should be the clincher because paper requires no effort, it's already written down.	5	-its important for people to see others contributions, it's important for the few that contribute -the message is: it's open, even if other decide not to contribute it makes a difference in the nature of history	maybe	-they haven't done artifact specific contributions, people can help each other see -it's a public way of aiding in the understanding of a collection -it would be too cluttered if there were contributions about everything	a, b, e, f	a	Director of Exhibitions	this would require lots of audience research which could include contributions (not the same as this project is talking about)
3- Curator, History Museum	5	5	-feels very strongly about this. There are ways to improve visitor interactions with objects -how we (museum prof) interpret vs. how visitors interpret objects -different ways to capture what people are thinking/how they are responding to objects -sometimes you end up getting something really powerful in interviews or video. But because of time and budget you just put it on the wall and it becomes a more passive experience. -there are different ways to enliven that interaction with visitors and there are ways to make it more alive and active interpretations	3	this really depends on what it is and the format	4	-wade through the stuff, some is repetitive, you have to get people who are sincere immed. [sic] -how we thinking about the future gallery experience -this documents the closing project that can help you see funding opportunities for the future -this is a process for archival work -have to make balances	yes	-sometimes it can spark a discussion and conversation and sometimes not -people want something meaningful and relevant and consider-ate and not random	a, b, d, e, f	a	Curator	-it would affect role very much, curators still play a role in what comes in in terms of the body of feedback, -they still determine what the public is seeing (in terms of feedback and museum content and objects) -As a curator, wants people to speak for themselves, the curator serves as a facilitator -doesn't want to be the person that's saying what people are worth -this is a way of sharing authority and sharing the floor, doesn't want to be the end all voice, -as a curator, still directing but is more understanding that there are multiple viewpoints
4- Program Director, Philanthropic Institution	5	5	contributed content always makes exhibits richer, more dynamic	3	doesn't always have to happen, if so it would drag out the process -it would make the exhibition process less nimble because everything has to be archived -its not about collecting, it's about the conversations happening	5	contributed content always makes exhibits richer, more dynamic	yes	they can say something and can shed light, the best kind of p.c. would create interesting relationships because they would shed light on each other during the exhibition	a, b, d, e, f	f philanthropic institution	Director of Cultural Program	he thinks that there should always be something unexpected

5- Vice President for Interpretation and Education, History Museum	2	4	I'm only modestly interested in user-generated content unless it is really relevant to the topic at hand. For example, museum visitors' opinions or associations with artworks don't hold much value for me, and seem just self-indulgent. However, community input or visitor comments that relate to historical experiences are meaningful and relevant.	5	In the case of history content, yes it should be archived.	5	It would not matter if the exhibit were object-based, or media-based, or interactive: if the information contributes to understanding historical experience, it can be significant.	maybe	Again, it all depends on the relevancy.	Other	a	Vice President for interpretation and Education	We do many of our projects with community participation, and also with visitor contributions. These approaches can add time to our process and they require us to be sensitive to how we approach our research, but they also add a layer of emotional resonance and deeper connections than might be possible without them. As well, it is important to recognize that history museum collections frequently represent just a narrow slice of the population with whom we have had long-standing relationships. Public and visitor-centered approaches permit us to broaden our reach into new constituencies and more appropriately represent our communities.
6- Exhibition Developer, Anthropology Museum	5	5	they have had more success using front-end evaluations, facebook has done a good job of conducting front ends, the people's responses have been the best-what they find interesting	3	this is only because we (own museum) archives so many other thinking, museums have so much to archive, it would need to be keyed and searchable for people down the road.	4	significant to who? For the academic group, no, it doesn't matter -does think that visitors are interested> it does add more relevance for the visitor and the development process because it helps the institution to interpret	yes	b/c it gives the visitor more to latch onto and the reason to reconsider things later	a, b, c, e,	a, Anthropology museum	Exhibition developer	it already does, they do front end evaluations, he would be the curator of responses and this would add a new process, it wouldn't change his job that much
7- Curator, History Museum	5	5	People generally enjoying seeing themselves (or parts of themselves) reflected in history. It helps us all feel that our experiences and identity are valued. When so much of history has been written by the victors' of war and power vacuums it can become an exclusive narrative and very divisive. That's why integrating social history via public outreach into an object-based exhibition offers branches of relatable content. Asking the question, "What do people want or hope to see in an exhibition?", can be crucial to identifying those interpretive holes that every museum has. For [own museum], it has helped us develop exhibitions that better connect us to our core membership, the local community, and the general public.	5	Yes, mostly because I am a huge personal fan of oral history projects and first-person accounts of history... and also strong object-based provenance. Objects alone can be very powerful, visceral sources of knowledge, but the experiences of people are often equally so. Opening interpretive power to the public means that you get to cast your net wide, get all the bits of knowledge and experience out there, and then bring it in and make it accessible when it would otherwise not be accessible. Also, in this day of technology, archiving (of stories and opinions) is SO simple to do. It takes up almost no physical space at all anymore. Why not? Here's also why archiving stories and opinions is important: http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps	5	because more often than not, with the expansion of public content also comes the expansion of understanding relevant objects; in and out of your collections.	yes	Because let's face it, not every object is exciting. But connecting an object with a person, a culture, an opinion, a movement, an experience, a tragedy, a joy (etc) brings about a certain unity to the visitor experience. It's not just context, it's a connection.	a,e	a	Curator	

8- Executive Director, Art Museum	4	4	<p>for a point of perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -audience will help others view exhibition in a different way than what just what one person can walk in with -it can create more questions rather than just provide answers, which is what a museum usually does (questions like adding dimension, wondering what else the object could say) -with history, you're engaging people in material they might not see as relevant, but you'd add relevance to the material by having public contributions -it's a way to connect historical object to current events and practices, it's a way to personify an object more than what a museum can offer. 	5	<p>particularly just for the museum, for the purpose of knowing how people are engaged. What matters and what might become important.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it's adds to the greater picture of what is important to us But how do you decide what to articulate? What's the vetting process? -there might be significance to contributed content that MIGHT seem unrelated. -if it's all unthoughtful then what's happening? What is this saying about what the museum is choosing to show? -it would be nearly impossible to archive all the contributions -there needs to be a system for archiving based on the goals of the museum. 	4	<p>because of smiley face notes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the APS has a trend of having contributed content: people that come, write smiley faces on post-it, so what is that saying about what the institution is presenting =discover that b/c of the type of visitors they get and what's there, people aren't able to comment b/c they can't relate/understand -if the comments are curated, then YES, they should be archived. 	yes	<p>this shows for other visitors that SOMEONE has been engaged and that it's a way of connecting to the object.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -showcasing other types of perspectives from simple to complex or societal based observations brings humanistic element to the object that might not be there with traditional interpretation. 	a, b, f	e	Executive Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -adding another element to the exhibition process would be difficult due to the lack of staff and the time constraints. -they are now trying to plan, if they were to add a process like this they would be in to do major advance planning to make sure they had enough time. -there should be a given area for contributions, people to already feel open by contributing in some way, but that would be a meaningful element for those that visit. -it's a lot of work so they wouldn't be able to do it regularly and it would be impossible for them to archive -this process would require additional resources and would be problematic for a small institution such as theirs.
9- Exhibition Interpretive Manager, Garden	5	5	<p>it's really helpful when you can connect a voice to the story and add an emotional layer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -like the Holocaust museum -it's understanding the people that contributed -in Changing Earth (Franklin) they were trying to explore different types and parts of the River better (Schuykill). People submitted themselves near the river and those images provided an opportunity for people to illustrate parts of the river as well as for visitors to look at people pictures. 	5	<p>we're still developing/ managing it</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Minnesota History Center/ Angie Deats: there's the opportunity for people to record their own stories and archive them through the eyes of a child 	5	<p>there was a project they did where they took an object at the Franklin and had people write their own labels for it, it's easier to engage people when it's informal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it makes it relevant and significant and it adds meaning -it's another way to connect to people personally -it's a different form of engagement 	yes	<p>it's generally in terms of experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it elevates and expands the opportunity for engagement 	a, b, c, d, e, f	f, garden	Exhibitions Interpretive Manager	<p>it does affect job already. As educators, unless we can make exhibitions/collections useful and relevant then...(we're not doing our job)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -we have to engage the public in dialog -when exhibits open, it's the beginning of the dialog -its always conceptually about the people who visit, so people can see themselves in the exhibit -visitors are part of the experience but we're trying to figure it out.
10- Curator, History Museum	4	4	<p>the way I think as a curator is as a facilitator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -has to be a generalist -has to become the specialist when working on an exhibit, but most of the time he's restating -finding content specialist and act as a facilitator and gives an overview of the subject -exhibits aren't there to answer every question, but they're there to provide interest and a space to consider and inspire people on the subject -the visitor learns something more by public contributions on the subject -then the visitor learns something more and the public contribution gives more perspective and that helps them to understand their own. 	4	<p>-as a curator, has to figure out how do I provide access to a collection through the exhibition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -has to use the exhibition to tell stories, and use the collection to illustrate stories and hopefully people will add their own contributions -look at the National History Day? like a science fair for historians to come and judge, students come in and respond and post to a blog 	4	<p>you have an exhibition and you have to write stuff... then you have someone who lived it and it can't get better than that. It's how to structure the collection through these stories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -consider how the curator structures that process -the process of trying to do that in real time participation too -how does the 90-9-1 ration translate to the exhibition and asking for content? 	yes	<p>it's good to have a variety on comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the visitor wants to get it -how do you edit the contributed content so that they are the most beneficial to the narrative, otherwise it's just distracting -consider how much time people spend at an exhibit (like 30 seconds), how do you design to that? 	a, b, d, f	a	Curator	<p>it would be huge, it's already affecting role/position now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -museum wants to go in that direction but he needs to find examples to emulate -wants to see examples of the development process and understand exactly how the actual exhibition express this. -Letting Go and the Participatory Museum are good guides and it's going to be a process It's about sharing authority and making that transparent within the community And affirming people's experiences -how does this reflect on the contributors -what are the payoffs/ consequences? >is this a clue in how to approach it?? -I'm providing communities a platform

VISITOR/ POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTOR SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Public contribution: Content that is contributed by the general public which comes in the form of stories connected to/inspired by museum's objects. How and what visitors can contribute is inspired by not only the objects but provocative questions posed by the museum. This content does not have to be encumbered by historical significance recognized by a museum.

Question 1

If and when you are a visitor at a state or local history museum, what kind of experience do you look for: *(choose all that apply)*

- a. I want to learn cold hard facts about history (dates, names, events, etc.)
 - b. I want to get an overall sense of the importance of objects displayed and their relationship to history
 - c. I primarily visit exhibitions with friends and family and/or to be in a museum setting, so the subject and content is secondary
 - d. I want to know why the objects are important enough to be in a museum exhibition
 - e. I want to understand how these objects are relevant to me
 - f. I want to know how the museum objects were discovered or preserved
- Other:

Question 2

A. Do you think contributions (personal stories) from the general public should be included in museum exhibitions?

(Scale of 1-5, 1=not at all, 5=yes, very much)

B. Specifically in a local history museum exhibition with objects?

(Scale of 1-5, 1=not at all, 5=yes, very much)

C. Please explain your answers.

Question 3

A. Would you ever go to an exhibition presenting contributions (personal stories) from the general public with museum objects? *(y/n)*

B. Would any of the following impact your decision?

(circle all that apply)

- i. The cost of exhibition/museum
- ii. If the public contributions were presented with only some of the objects on exhibit, not all

- iii. If the public contributions were presented with historical information from curators
- iv. If they helped you understand how and why the museum objects were relevant to you
- v. If you could contribute content to the exhibition while there
- vi. If the public contributions came from people within your community
- vii. If you knew that the public contributions had been reviewed and verified by curators
- viii. Other:

Question 4

A. Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance? *(Y/N)* Why or Why not?

Question 5

A. Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important? *(Y/N)* Why or Why not?

Question 6

Which of the following would positively affect your likelihood to contribute? *(choose all the apply)*

- a. There were other hand-written contributions posted
- b. You could be credited for your contribution
- c. You saw other contributions on printed text panels
- d. You heard other contributions on an audio tour

Question 7

Do you identify yourself as:

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. I'd rather not say

Question 8

What is your age?

(17 and under) (18-24) (25-34) (35-44) (45-54) (55-64) (65+)

Visitor/Possible Contributor Survey Result Summary

The goal of this survey is to assess visitor attitudes towards public contributions in exhibitions. 30 people were surveyed.

Question 1:

If and when you are a visitor at a state or local history museum, what kind of experience do you look for.

Answer Options	Response
I want to learn cold hard facts about history (dates, names, events, etc.)	37%
I want to get an overall sense of the importance of objects displayed and their relationship to history	87%
I primarily visit exhibitions with friends and family and/or to be in a museum setting, so the content is secondary	7%
I want to know why the objects are important enough to be in a museum exhibition	37%
I want to understand how these objects are relevant to me	20%
I want to know how the museum objects were discovered or preserved	37%

Question 2:

A) Do you think contributions (personal stories) from the general public should be included in museum exhibitions?

not at all				yes, definitely	Rating Average
1	5	11	10	3	3.30

B) Specifically in a local history museum exhibition with objects?

not at all				yes, definitely	Rating Average
1	2	10	7	10	3.77

Question 3:

A) Would you ever go to an exhibition presenting contributions (personal stories) from the general public with museum objects?

Answer Options	Response
yes	87%
no	13%

B) Would any of the following impact your decision?

Answer Options	Response
The cost of exhibition/museum	50%
If the public contributions were presented with only some of the objects on exhibit, not all	17%
If the public contributions were presented with historical information from curators	63%
If they helped you understand how and why the museum objects were relevant to you	60%
If you could contribute content to the exhibition while there	27%
If the public contributions came from people within your community	27%
If you knew that the public contributions had been reviewed and verified by curators	53%

Question 4:

Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?

Answer Options	Response
yes	87%
no	13%

Question 5:

Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?

Answer Options	Response
yes	60%
no	40%

Question 6:

Which of the following would positively affect your likelihood to contribute?

Answer Options	Response
There were other hand-written contributions posted	37%
You could be credited for your contribution	3%
You saw other contributions on printed text panels	73%
You heard other contributions on an audio tour	37%

DEMOGRAPHICS

Answer Options	Response
Male	27%
Female	70%
I'd rather not say	3%

The age range of respondents was as follows:

Answer Options	Response
25-34	41%
35-44	19%
45-54	7%
55-64	35%
65+	3%

VISITOR/POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTOR SURVEY RESULTS *(of open-ended questions)*

Survey #	Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?	Why or why not? (Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?)	Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?	Why or why not? (Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?)
1	yes	They could explain or augment the importance of the object if they had specific experiences with the object or its type.	yes	If I'm an expert or have some specific experience that is relative, I could add a new perspective to how/why the object has importance.
2	yes	Because a lot of what is found in museums can be interpreted in different ways and other people's perspective could help show that.	yes	Because a lot of what is found in museums can be interpreted in different ways and other people's perspective could help show that.
3	no	I think it's possible that people's stories would help me to understand their importance or relevance, but only if there was some relevant cultural/historical link between the people and the objects/history. I don't see the general public being helpful in doing this and would likely find stories that seemed irrelevant offputting.	no	I don't think my own experience with or relation to an object would be relevant (because it would have no historical relevance) and I wouldn't want to affect others opinions/feelings by sharing my own. I believe independent thought should be promoted.
4	yes	I appreciate the background information aspect.		I am not interested in the general public or my reaction only if there is a direct personal history type of relevance to the object
5	yes	Yes, when we assimilate new information into our existing schema it promotes retention, and personal connections help us assign value	yes	I think a great deal of appreciation for a museum comes from how successfully we can contextualize the data- personal anecdotes would certainly assist with this process
6	yes	I think this is the most important factor in creating interest for me. An object is exactly and only that until it can be conflated with a person, at which point it becomes something far more dynamic and interesting.	yes	It forces the beholder to consider context, values, and take a step outside of his/her self.
7	yes	It would depend, actually, on the focus of the stories. And on what you mean by "story". If it's just commentary (e.g., "I like this because..." or "This means ___ to me."), it would need to come from particularly knowledgeable and/or insightful people in order to add to my experience. If it's an actual narrative (this happened, then this happened, then this happened), it would need to be relevant to the core historical lesson the object is there to teach. (A "my grandmother found this in her attic and my parents used to bring me here to the museum to see it and now I bring my own kids" kind of story would not add any value for me.)		I'm not very knowledgeable about history. My comments would shed light on current day attitudes / culture, but not on the time period the object is there to teach us about.
8	yes	definitely much more powerful when connected to personal experience in fitting into larger context	no	I don't see my own relationship with the object or experience as contributing to the larger mission of the museum. If something is particularly exciting to me, I'll try to contact a curator or guide for more information or a reproduction.
9	yes	it does sort of depend on the stories - if they had some story that was meaningful or interesting or clearly related to the object then it would probably enhance my understanding, but if they are just some random people with opinions it might be distracting, since we get so much of that everywhere. But I do think everyday stories should definitely be part of museum exhibits. I guess I'm a little confused about whether these stories would be about how people just react to an object or about how their personal stories are connected to or really relevant to that object.	yes	I think it could be helpful, under the right circumstances.
10	yes	In the Museum of the Confederacy and the Museum of the Dutch Resistance in Amsterdam, the stories of the people who lived those events make the museums memorable; not just the bullet fragments and uniforms	no	I am thinking that noone cares how just anyone relates to the exhibit, but how those who have stories from that time and place relates is helpful.
11	yes	more perspective viewpoints	yes	some insight, I hope

Survey #	Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?	Why or why not? (Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?)	Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?	Why or why not? (Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?)
12	yes	Others may have experiences or knowledge that I haven't	yes	If I had specific knowledge about something that didn't seem apparent in other notes, it may be of interest.
13	yes	Other people's stories could provide context and perhaps insight. These stories and/or the information they provide could help me to better understand or appreciate the object and its significance.	yes	Assuming I had context or insight into application or understanding of the object, then yes. Merely how I react to the object is personal, and others' reaction are not or should not be relevant to me.
14	yes	Yes, it would help show ways in which the objects are popularly received, ie. what do people really appreciate and understand?	yes	Having to express yourself is always useful in clarifying your thoughts.
15	yes	Absolutely! It's the personal touch that brings a museum alive...	yes	It would be interesting to hear many different and diverse stories about why a piece is important to a viewer.
16	yes	if they are historically and/or factually relevant and not merely experiential impressions.	yes	If I can contribute my own knowledge in a way that broadens others' experience, it could help, assuming I am able to communicate that knowledge effectively.
17	yes	Because we all belong to communities	yes	Same
18	yes	But only if the stories relate to a personal contemporaneous experience involving, or association with, an object that had a direct and tangible role or connection to an event of historical significance, and the stories are told by a participant or near bystander.	no	Because the significance or draw of the object is (should be) independent of my subjective reaction or relationship and therefore irrelevant.
19	no	I think it would be fun and engaging, but not help me understand the importance.	no	The same as above.
20	yes	It would add a human dimension to the experience	yes	Strength in diversity! Everyone sees the same object differently.
21	no	Unless the contributor has a uniquely relevant perspective practically, historically or artistically that was at the level of a curator or scholar or historical figure, their story is unlikely to be of interest to me unless I know and care about them a value their insights (i.e., a friend with whom I visited the museum).	no	Perhaps since I have studied art, worked in museums and love visiting them but I would not inflict my impressions on others unless asked since it might be as likely to block as advance their own personal relationship with an object or exhibition.
22	yes	Maybe hearing a personal story pertaining to the exhibit would give added insight	yes	Same as written in #7. Sometimes people are shown another way to interpret something when someone else interprets differently from oneself.
23	yes	To get a better understanding of the impact that history continues to have, how it has shaped our community and continues to inspire ideas today.	yes	While this seems to be the job of a curator, I think public opinion could enhance the understanding of the connectivity that exists today to an object.
24	no	I don't need a personal connection to be interested in an object.	no	Sometimes overly personal stories can be too leading when viewing objects.
25	yes	I think it could. I love a good story—I think people inherently love narrative, and it has the potential to make an object more meaningful, more human.	no	I'm sure some people like this, but it's probably the people who like to tweet and think they are more important than they actually are.
26	yes.	I would want to know as much as possible about their relationship to the exhibition	yes	The more opinions on how objects are significant, the better.
27	yes	A new point of view and experience	no	Perhaps but not necessarily . It depends on so many factors. Art is a personal experience.

Survey #	Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?	Why or why not? (Do you think seeing or listening to other people's stories related to museum objects would help you in understanding their importance or relevance?)	Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?	Why or why not? (Do you think being able to share how you can relate to an object would help others understand why it is important?)
28	yes	I totally think that other people's stories are important because I don't think history exists in a vacuum... it is shaped, and we are shaped, when we interact with it. Although there's value in your own individual interaction with history/historical objects, a communal understanding of the past can be very beneficial in creating a stronger community approach to the future.	yes	I think my answer to this question is both yes and no. Yes: there are definite benefits in a communal approach to teaching and sharing our thoughts on historical objects. Community-based learning creates a stronger communal understanding of our past and helps shape our future, as I mentioned. When the exchange of ideas is based on a specific object, it raises the value and importance of that object in the minds of the participants. No: When dialogue begins, even if it's based on a specific object, often times the importance of the sharing ends up exceeding the importance of the object itself. I know I've often began conversations based on a specific object and ended up with a larger, wider concept of some idea vaguely based on the original object. (i.e. starting a discussion on how penguins "toboggan", based on an exhibit, and ending on thinking about maximum travel efficiency for animals in various terrains and climates). So personal stories and sharing may not always result in understanding why an object is important, but more likely than not the value of an object is elevated in the mind of the viewer once the object has been assigned a narrative context.
29	yes	A personal touch can make something foreign more relatable, but not in every case. The story has to be something pretty interesting.	no	Perhaps. If every visitor tells their story, no matter how big of a stretch the connection is, it can be content overload. I'm not sure I care whether another visitor has a connection to the object or not.
30	yes	It's a different perspective from my own, which is interesting - but I also wouldn't want someone else's personal story or perspective to influence my own observation of the object. There would have to be a balance in presentation-- where I am able to observe on my own and if I choose to see/hear personal stories about the object, then I can refer to them.	yes	But its a fine line. See answer to #7

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