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ENGL337: Theories & Research in Writing

28 April 2025

The Role of the History Museum: Discussing ‘Missing’ History Using Experiential Data

Introduction

This crux of this study stems from the observed rhetoric of institutions. In recent years, the public and scholars have been engaging with important matters of representation. Through education and social media, people are calling for the recognition and recontextualization of historical figures and events with the ‘full story’ that has been previously ignored, intentionally or otherwise. Technology appears to be part of this evolution in interpretation, as previous barriers are not as insurmountable anymore. People from different regions, countries, and continents should be able to share their experiences and should have a voice regarding their own history. However, as Winston Churchill is credited with saying, “history is written by the victors.” Globally, the victors have historically been white, English-literate men that control what information is documented, spread, and perpetuated. In the past, the white male point of view was too cemented into all forms of life for examination. Thanks to levels of communication that can bypass limitations set by dead white men, such as telephones, social media platforms, online publications and translations of information, etc., we can now gather from more complex and *whole* views of events, locations, figures. In the 21st century, electronic communication and dissemination of knowledge are omnipresent, thus impacting how we view the established, potentially prejudicial historical interpretations.

Given the societal biases and imbalances that have been deeply rooted across the globe, larger institutions that receive funding from the federal level and/or sustain themselves through private donors reflect the ideals and perspectives of those who keep the institutions running. Public education may be the largest goal of museums, but a close second that occasionally eclipses education is what must be done to continue receiving funding. As permanent exhibits in museums are formed and then remain unchanged for years at a time, the descriptions of artifacts, events, and people can easily become outdated and offensive. The following questions are interrogated through primary research with the intent of demonstrating ‘gaps’ between education from media and academia, and museum interpretations that are designed for entertainment and education: “do people think that museums represent history completely? Are there misinterpretations or intentional omission of facts regarding specific demographics or subjects?” The primary research conducted intended to locate and probe potential gaps within the context of scholarly examinations that have already taken place. The phenomenon of misrepresentation or incomplete information in exhibitions is noticeable and growing at an accelerating speed in recent years. Once the evidence of this phenomenon is well-established, then society can move to correct these interpretations on systemic levels while combatting the issue of funding.

Literature Review

The analysis of museum exhibit effectiveness and presented interpretation of historical events is a recently established field of scholarship. In her work, “The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences,” Leslie Bedford compiles and analyzes the scholars that built and argued within the field of museum studies, particularly about the role of experience in exhibitions. Historian Steven Conn refers to museums as “sites of intellectual and cultural debate where the prevailing cultural ideas and assumptions of

American society were put on display and where changes in those assumptions were reflected” (Bedford 22). The ‘formative years’ of museum analysis spawned from Steven Conn’s work *Museums and American Intellectual Life 1876-1926*, which was published in 1998. Museum intentions from the nineteenth century, heavily featuring the art, natural history, and anthropology fixated upon in the Victorian worldview, took their visitors through galleries “follow[ing] a trajectory from simple to complex, from savage to civilized, from ancient to modern” (Bedford 23). Each museum’s collections were the star of the show, the era’s “object-based epistemology” creating and disseminating knowledge to viewers (Bedford 23). The beginning of this field of study did not “discuss museum education – which assumes an interest in the visitor – perhaps because it didn’t exist” (Bedford 23). Teaching the public or interest in “the visitor experience” did not emerge as “a formal term and field of inquiry” until the late twentieth century (Bedford 23). From this point, Scholar Lisa Roberts’ focus on interpretation as narrative, George Hein’s approach to constructivist educational theory, and Lynn Dierking’s work in visitor studies serve as the prime methods of the conversation about museum exhibitions.

Over the past few decades, science-based museums have maintained “a constant process of re-adaptation” architecturally or “in their traditional area of expertise and occupation, seeking to leave behind the conventional conception of their being places that merely housed and displayed ancient artifacts” (Rosalino 787). The context of the Cold War revolutionized science centers, by moving narratives towards exploration and explanation, rather than display of collections. This evolution from display to interactivity was generally successful over time, while individual instances of setbacks “due to financial and bureaucratic constraints” occurred (Rosalino 788). Scholars have defined interactivity as “the intersection that relates four contexts

within which the visitor is immersed and engaged: the social, the personal, the physical, and the temporal contexts” (Rosalino 788). The four contexts center on knowledge and circumstances outside of the exhibit itself which impact viewer reception and comprehension.

A prime example of scholars’ contexts of interactivity leading to exhibition backlash is the attempted 50th anniversary display of *The Enola Gay*, the B-29 Superfortress that was used to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The plane was left in disrepair for decades, with veterans forming committees dedicated to properly maintaining the vehicle. The Smithsonian started restoration efforts in December 1984, and the National Air and Space Museum director, Martin Harwit, had a vision “for the museum [that] diverged from previous directors” (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Harwit wanted the museum to be a “public conscience” that would discuss topics “under public debate,” so he consciously decided to display *The Enola Gay* (Atomic Heritage Foundation). The plane was placed in the museum annex that was designed to house the larger planes, “with an accompanying message about the dangers of strategic bombing and escalation” (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Admiral Noel Gaylor of the Research Advisory Committee, believed that any exhibition of *The Enola Gay* would imply “that we are celebrating the first and so far the only use of nuclear weapons against human beings” (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Harwit’s simultaneously ‘myth-clearing’ exhibitions on the World Wars were met with discomfort and minor controversy, the choices within the location and labels of *The Enola Gay* exhibit exacerbated the negative attention on the evolution of museum education. Veterans voiced dissent as they felt that “the exhibition dishonored veterans by discussing the controversy over the decision to drop the bomb and displaying graphic photos of atomic bomb victims,” while the Senate “also unanimously proclaimed the script as ‘revisionist and offensive to many World War II veterans’” (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Through several series of revisions,

neither aisle of opinion was satisfied for the portrayal of the controversial decision itself, the portrayal of the American soldiers of the time, and the past and present Japanese perspectives of the matter. The exhibition was ‘scrapped’ and replaced with the display of *The Enola Gay*’s fuselage without any discussion of the broader context. While these contexts were initially formulated for science-based institutions, the case of *The Enola Gay* demonstrates that history museums face the same issues in properly displaying artifacts and narratives.

Examination of public reception and comprehension has only developed further from the initial studies or exhibit changes that occurred at the beginning of the field. Ece Apan’s work as a PhD student at Sakarya University in Turkey demonstrates “the use of virtual museums in cultural transfer” as an “interdisciplinary approach of significant importance” that “play a crucial role in cultural transfer by digitally preserving cultural heritage” (Apan 100). While his work uses Ottoman artifacts as the testing ground, the developing techniques to curate virtual museums could be revolutionary for cultural preservation, artifact repatriation, and vast global education. Apan emphasizes the “great importance” of “ensur[ing] permanence by using visual materials and relying on first-hand sources” to educate, with the new benefit of protecting the ancient or fragile items as this education takes place (Apan 100). Within Apan’s Ottoman-focused examination, outside of the Ottoman Empire’s former geographic boundaries, it is easier to see and understand the “architectural structures, handicrafts, manuscripts, clothing styles and many other areas [that] bear the traces of Ottoman culture” (Apan 101). The ease of access to artifacts and culturally significant information is “especially valuable for educational institutions and individual researchers” that wish to “examine the works closely, access detailed information and even navigate through the works with virtual tours” from wherever on Earth they reside (Apan 101). Virtual museums are a technological advancement that are beginning to develop and

distribute educational materials in the present. The priority of user interactivity in traditional museum settings have paved the way for desiring the same interaction and cultural education in a more accessible way.

The presentation of ancient and recent history is a highly topical issue, especially in the United States, as President Donald Trump has decreed executive orders concerning narratives and federal funding of historical monuments, sites, and objects. Trump has accused the Smithsonian Institution of propagating “divisive, race-based ideology” and issued an executive order “demanding an end to federal funding for exhibitions and programs based on racial themes that divide Americans” (Gelt). The order, titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History”, given in March 2025, directs Vice President JD Vance to “remove ‘improper ideology’ from the Smithsonian’s 19 museums and the National Zoo in Washington, DC,” while also seeking to “restore Department of the Interior public monuments and statues that were removed or changed ‘to perpetuate a false reconstruction of American history, inappropriately minimize the value of certain historical events or figures, or include any other improper partisan ideology’” (Gelt). Several currently running exhibitions are listed in the order that depict the narratives of being “driven by ideology rather than truth,” but the ‘moves’ by institutions or comments by institutions’ directors are still being made (Gelt). The modern American socio-political climate allows for discussion, dissent, and commentary upon government actions through journalism and social media in ways that other countries do not permit to the same degree. With different administrations and political parties, nations are consistently changing how history and its facets are viewed or portrayed by the year or term in office.

Through studies conducted in the field, single elements of exhibits of artifacts have been examined to determine impact on visitor interpretation. Kouros Samanian’s work that discusses

the role of titles in Iranian art galleries, states, “titles of works of art have generally proven to be influential elements in reading and interpretation of the artworks” (Samanian 29). In the context of exhibitions, “titles can be considered as a physical component of the museum or art gallery’s space” where “learning, [as] a subcategory of interpretation, occurs as a result of the dialogue between the personal background of the visitor and the context of museums” (Samanian 30).

Titles, like any written portion accompanying artifacts in an exhibit, “can act as a medium between the artwork and audience” (Samanian 30). The progression from exhibitions as ‘collection displays’, to a space of learning, and then to a space where variation of interpretation can be manipulated or examined by scholars is not linear and can be dissected for continual studies in different countries, institutional settings, and temporal or social contexts.

Methods

From this interest in examining visitor response to educationally centered history museums, I wished to conduct a similar study of exhibit perception among my local community. I created a survey, through Google Forms, that was circulated to students and faculty at Xavier University. With an exclusively college demographic, I entered the data collection process with the knowledge that the level of academia and educational levels of participants would be much higher than if the survey was distributed across the city evenly. I was hoping that the inclusion of faculty rather than only the Xavier student body would increase the specificity of feedback. While several questions are yes/no format, I was hoping that faculty would have detailed examples for the answer to the last open-ended question. The survey questions are:

- Have you attended any museums that were history-based or had historical exhibits in the last 15 years?

- Have you noted any times that you knew more about a subject (especially more holistically/from different perspectives) compared to the explanation or descriptions the museum offered?
- Have you seen exhibits that ‘oversimplify’ more complex subjects or events?
- Were there any specific subject areas that were ‘missing’ information or misrepresenting an event?
- If you can recall, what areas appeared to be missing information, oversimplifying complex subjects or events, and/or misrepresenting elements? (Multiple answer options – provenance, race-based matters, international relationships/relations between countries, wartime actions, I haven’t noticed any specific areas that are misrepresented or lacking perspectives, and other, with the ability to submit their own additional areas)
- If you’ve noticed such gaps or inconsistencies in the presentation of history at museums and can recall them (vaguely or explicitly), write what you remember from your experience(s). If unapplicable, write N/A. (open ended, able to submit paragraphs)

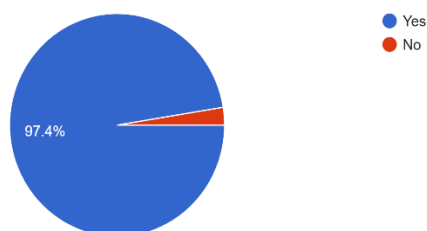
The survey was distributed first to the faculty of the History department at Xavier University, and some sent the form onto the students in their courses. I sent the form to my circles of classmates and acquaintances, as well as posted the form on social media to cast a wider net than exclusively the History department. This survey, since it was circulated through a college setting, may have an element of confirmation bias as academics and students are more likely to notice the issues I’m probing in comparison to the rest of the American population.

Results

Within the time frame of collection, the survey was submitted by thirty-nine respondents.

Have you attended any museums that were history-based or had historical exhibits in the last 15 years?

39 responses

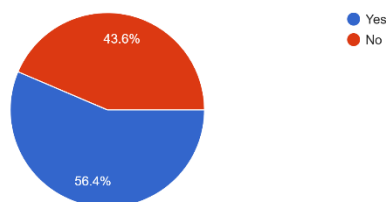


According to the first yes/no question regarding recent museum attendance, 97.4% of respondents had attended at least one history-centered museum.

This percentage indicates that only one respondent has not been to a history-based exhibition in the last fifteen years. For question two, which asked respondents if they had noticed knowing more about a subject compared to the explanation or description that the museum offered, 56.4% of respondents had answered yes, with 43.6% answering no. This means

Have you noted any times that you knew more about a subject (especially more holistically/from different perspectives) compared to the explanation or descriptions the museum offered?

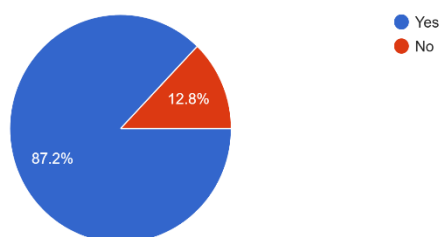
39 responses



that twenty-two of the thirty-nine people had indicated experience with knowing more perspectives or facets of a person or event than a museum presented with their exhibit. The third

Have you seen exhibits that 'oversimplify' more complex subjects or events?

39 responses

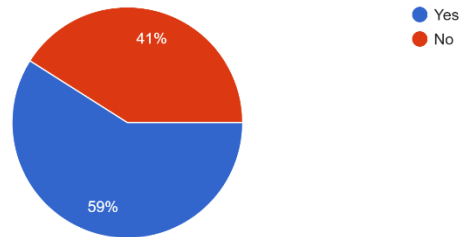


question, centered on the 'oversimplification' of complex subjects or events, resulted in 87.2% of respondents (thirty-four of the thirty-nine) indicating that they had experienced such oversimplification in their encounters with museums. The fourth and final 'yes or no'

question asked respondents if they had noticed any specific subject areas that were

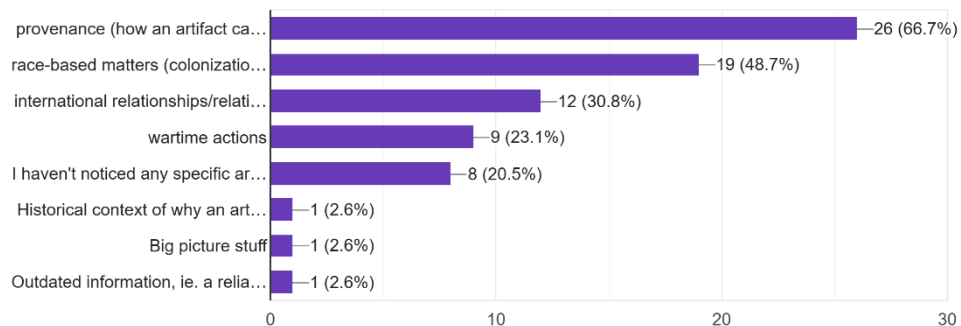
misrepresented or missing information, to which 59% of respondents indicated ‘yes’ to, with 41% responding ‘no’. Twenty-three respondents had noticed misrepresentation or missing information from exhibits they visited, while sixteen had not noticed such ‘gaps’ in presented information.

Were there any specific subject areas that were 'missing' information or misrepresenting an event?
39 responses



The question that gave six options (provenance, race-based matters, international relationships, wartime actions, I haven’t noticed any specific areas, other) allowed for multiple selection asked respondents to check all areas that appeared to be missing information, oversimplifying complex subjects or events, and/or misrepresenting elements, according to their recollection. 66.7% (twenty-six of thirty-nine) of respondents selected provenance, 48.7% (nineteen) selected race-based matters, 30.8% (twelve) selected international relationships, 23.1% (nine) selected wartime

If you can recall, what areas appeared to be missing information, oversimplifying complex subjects or events, and/or misrepresenting elements?
39 responses



actions, and 20.5% (eight) selected that they had not noticed any specific

subject areas. Three respondents had selected other and wrote in the following: “historical context of why an artwork or tool was made”, “big picture stuff”, and “outdated information, i.e.

reliance on very outdated scholarship (sometimes even 19th century scholarship! as opposed to using current scholarship).”

The last question of the survey, which was open-ended and able to be submitted in short answer paragraph format, asked respondents to vaguely or explicitly state personal experiences they recall encountering the gaps or inconsistencies previously asked about, or to write N/A if this question does not apply. Seven respondents answered N/A. Some were able to pinpoint the feeling of noticing discrepancies but responded that they were unable to provide vague or implicit examples for this survey. Such general replies include:

- “I have felt this a lot but cannot pinpoint specific examples”
- “I am sure there are instances it occurred that I saw but I do not have the knowledge to recall specific instances”
- “I don’t remember specifics”
- “I can’t recall specifics but I know I’ve seen some things and I’m like hmm should that really be here?”
- “Lots of history museums block the history off into a few sentences and give absolutely zero nuance. I can’t recall a specific time but I do note it a lot at various museums, which never acknowledge where the stuff came from or its real importance.”

Some were able to express specific types of information that were missing or stated without nuance in their experiences. The methods of item acquisition and explanation of artifacts’ historical or cultural importance were caught red-handed with these remarks. Such replies include:

- “old exhibits that glorify acquisition without context”
- “not stepping back and getting a long term historical view”

- “I asked why an artifact was important/in here and no one could answer my question directly”
- “I just remember there not being a whole lot of information on how certain (non white European) artifacts were obtained (stolen).”
- “I think there has been more attentiveness to provenance in the past 15 years. At the beginning of this period, it seems like it was pretty common to just note the “collection” from which items came. But I have noted a shift toward more explanation of who the collector was and the nature of the collecting.”
- “Too many to recall exactly, but one is Vikings having horns all over the place.”

One response stands out among these general replies, illustrating experiences with the internet or news media that relates to the survey’s line of questioning, that response noting, “the inconsistencies I recall have not been firsthand, only through news articles.”

Some recalled specific instances and/or desired to name specific practices or experiences.

One individual remarked on the projection of present boundaries and politics upon the past in North America, despite the heavy fluctuation of state- and nation lines throughout North American development. They said:

“One example that I often see in History-related museums is the anachronistic use of maps, and most specifically the anachronistic use of maps of North America before the 1850s. It is unfortunately very common to, say, have an exhibit or discussion on the American West or Westward Expansion and to show a map that includes the present-day boundaries of the United States, Mexico, and Canada. This is problematic and inaccurate because it takes modern borders and boundaries and projects them back into the past. This can give the public a misunderstanding that (for example) that borders between the three North American countries have always looked

the way they do in the present, when in fact these borders have shifted multiple times in the past two centuries and are, in and of themselves, historical artifacts. In short: I'm a stickler for accurate, historical maps being used in their proper context."

Slavery and race-based matters appear to be the largest problems noted by the respondents. Those responses are as follows:

"I once visited a museum house that, while not a plantation itself, had a history associated with slavery (one of the owners had an enslaved person). The tour guide (an older white woman) brushed over this completely – calling the enslaved person a 'servant' that had 'grown up with' the owner, and that all the 'servants' were eventually freed. She mainly talked about the architecture of the house and how the wealthy white family lived."

"The Cincinnati UGRR Freedom Center misrepresented or oversimplified certain aspects of slavery and race-based discrimination at several points in its exhibits, especially in the videos and short films it showed."

"The Texas State Museum dramatically underplayed slavery in the pre-Civil War era of Texas history. The French Military Museum greatly exaggerated the role of the French Armed Forces and minimized the role of American and British forces in the defeat of Germany in 1944 and 1945."

"There are several sites I've visited that had poorly contextualized exhibits or interpretation, but none as bad as the Shirley Plantation in VA, founded in the early 1600s, which did not mention slavery ONCE on the tours or in any exhibits, despite a long history of enslaving people to work there. Hoping things have changed since but it was a privately owned site and the family's ancestors owned slaves... perhaps they haven't come to grips yet with their history."

Secondary to responses based on race, where items or human remains were found and how did they come to be in the museum (referred to as provenance by scholars) was a common theme of respondents' answers. Additionally, inquiries as to why the items remained in a foreign location or what statements nations were making by holding onto foreign and likely stolen items were present. Those responses are as follows:

“Lack of provenance is the most common issue, followed by a lack of discussion of more complex matters, I assumed ostensibly to ‘just present the facts.’ One of the cases I remember more clearly is an exhibit on the British Baroque a few years ago in London. There was so much controversy on how slavery was presented, that they had to redo the labels (I think it made it on the news, on various blogs, e.g., <https://theartwanderer.co.uk/museums-colonial-context/>).”

“I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and everything from Greek pottery to musical instruments had very littler information about the significance of each item. Some had basic plaques explaining what it was, when it was from, where it was from, but I would have liked a bit more information. Why were the pole arms designed that way? How did that respond to improvements in armor technology? Why were the instruments made? What role did they fill: entertainment, spirituality, wartime, etc.?”

“In a recent traveling exhibit on Pompeii, I noted the labels were dramatically oversimplified, saying things like ‘still life on plaster,’ rather than giving the details of the subject (fruits and other food, likely from a dining room context or similar), and implying that a) this was simply aesthetic artwork rather than an image created to fit into a specific context and provide a theme, spur conversation, reflect values of the household, etc., and b) that we did not have more information about the specific location where the item was excavated. Often, in Pompeii specifically, we know not only the exact house but the room, and providing this information is a

matter of only an extra line or two of text and gives a wealth of context for those who have more than a passing familiarity with Pompeii. My issue largely comes down to assuming that an exhibit's audience is uneducated and uninterested, gatekeeping information that could be skimmed over by some but would provide a wealth of useful knowledge to those who want to learn more (which is, generally, the point of an exhibition, no?).”

Conclusion –

This survey was distributed to an audience of college students and faculty members in a large, metropolitan city next to the Ohio River. There are three colleges within that city, and the survey was spread to other age- and education- level peers, likely at other colleges in the Ohio region. This context of demographics can elaborate upon the ‘positive’ responses in the survey that heavily indicate ‘negative’ or disappointing experiences in history-based museums.

While small, the data targeted a few specific subject areas that were misrepresented or missing information that can then be examined for accidental or intention omission from the site or organization. As referenced in an open-ended response, a wealthy southern family continued to reference enslaved people related to their property as servants instead, and the respondent notes that the site remains privately owned by its original family. Similarly, wealthy donors that have the capital or family collections to grant to museums have a say in the narratives presented since they are directly financing the institution at large. There are larger societal questions that involves the generational wealth that allows for dedication to the arts, like where such properties or vast amounts of wealth come from. In the American context, those most able to donate to museums have been those related to slavery or Gilded Age – era venture capitalism that heightened American wage disparities, created resource monopolies, and exploited working class

labor for exponential profits. From this source of financing, museums express generosity towards donors through the perpetuation of events or people that those donors would agree with.

However, in the world of scholarship, this survey resulted in a miniscule data set that can only hope to be a drop in the bucket of scholarship that examines public reaction to institutional interpretation of history. In discussing history, this study is America-centered, so presented information and interpretation may vary in other nations to an extreme level. This project was intended to examine this admittedly small and highly educated demographic, to portray on a small scale a much larger phenomenon that is shown and expanded upon through international journalism and social media efforts. I hope to be a single investigator in this matter that eventually is attributed to the general examination of historical presentation and public education. This subject matter will take decades and thousands of studies to impact how institutions display their exhibits, as the longer standing and well-established museums would need increasingly more data or negative public response before changes are called for.

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