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# Art, History, and Science Museums: A Cross-Cultural Conversation



by Eric Siegel, [Benjamin Filene](#), Deborah  
Schwartz and Jennifer MacGregor

The past century has witnessed the rise of distinct museums for art, history, and science. That trend has

accelerated in the past twenty-five years with the dramatic expansion of science museums and the increasingly specialized museology of art and public history institutions. This session, designed as a conversation among leaders with experience in each of these fields, addressed what each of these fields might learn from each other, with an eye towards how tomorrow's museums might benefit from such cross-pollinations. The participants focused on mission, exhibitions, and interpretation, while considering the impact that these two core activities have on other aspects of the museum, such as audience development and strategic planning.

Eric Siegel, Executive Vice President for Programs and Planning of the New York Hall of Science, and session chair, framed the question as follows: *"When I visit an art or history or science museum, what do I see there that I wish our institution could learn to do?"* While not all of the presentations addressed this question specifically, they did each highlight the differences and convergences among these categories of museums. Rather than integrating the talks as a seamless narrative (which would misrepresent the session and the topic) this article presents summaries of each of the presentations prepared by the session panelists.

## **Eric Siegel, New York Hall of Science**

To introduce the science center perspective, Eric showed a very short video taken the day before

the session at the Hall of Science. The session participants witnessed a typical science center day, kinetic and social, with an overwhelmingly young, minority audience. The video

illustrated the several modes of learning that make up a science center experience, including self-guided inquiry, "Explainer" interaction with visitors, and hands-on workshops.

While the Hall of Science is very proud of the diversity of audiences and modes of learning, Eric wondered how science centers might emulate some of the characteristics of art and history museums.

### **How might science centers gain an adult audience who stand still?**

The science center audience is young and getting younger. While this offers many opportunities to the field, it would be good to broaden the range of ages participating in science center activities, with the concomitant broadening of learning styles.

### **How can science centers incorporate controversy?**

History museum exhibitions have become a forum for examining the nature of history and the changing context of understanding historical events. Such exhibitions as *Mining the Museum* and *Slavery in New York* change the public understanding not only of historical events but of how history is written. Such radical self-examination has not been a characteristic of science centers.

### **How can science centers embrace ambiguity?**

Fundamental to the engagement with art is the engagement with ambiguity of meanings. In science centers, lack of clarity of an exhibition is considered a failure; in contemporary art, multiple conflicting

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*Can museums be funny? The City Museum in St. Louis has expanded the definition of what can happen in a museum.*



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meanings is at the heart of the visitor's encounter with artworks. Similarly, the best history museum exhibitions incorporate the interleaving, conflicting strands of narrative that form our understanding of history.

**What about Mortality?** The effective and

affecting exhibition ***Open House: if These Walls Could Speak*** at the Minnesota Historical Society evokes an awareness of our own mortality and fallibility. The implicit narrative of science centers is teleological and heroic, that human knowledge is enduring and that progress underlies all human endeavors.

#### Science Centers Exhibits are Never Funny.

For that matter, most museum experiences are not designed to evoke laughter, though irony and wit are valued resources for almost every other form of human expression.

### ***Benjamin Filene University of North Carolina Greensboro***

From 1997-2006, Benjamin served as an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society.

Exploring the relationship between history, art, and science museums is a chance to look at trends in contemporary practice but also as an opportunity to explore issues of institutional identity. What makes a history

museum a history museum or a science center a science center? While some may bemoan over-specialization, I am more struck by the amount of cross-pollination. Within history museums, in fact, there has been so much borrowing

across the disciplines that I'm left asking, "What makes a history museum *different* from a science center or a children's museum?"

I'm speaking from the vantage point of a certain kind of history museum. The Minnesota History Center, the flagship building of the Minnesota Historical Society was built in 1992, at the beginning of a wave of large, state-sponsored history museums. Through the vision of people like Barbara Franca, the History Center set out to be visitor-friendly—a vibrant, accessible, relevant, and fun destination for school groups, tourists, and families. To reach visitors in this way, it had to break the stereotyped expectations for history museums as dusty repositories of do-not-touch signs. It had, in other words, to draw on lessons learned at other kinds of museums.

From children's museums, the History Center absorbed the insight that different visitors learn in different ways. Some learn by reading, but others learn by seeing, by hearing, by touching, or by participating kinesthetically. From science centers in particular, we learned the power of hands-on engagement, where visitors assume the role of explorers. From theater, we understood the importance of environment—that visitors pick up unspoken cues from their surroundings. From art museums, we absorbed lessons about the power of metaphor and juxtaposition—that the literal is not always the most powerful route to communication.

So the History Center became an amalgam of these influences from other museums. This mix has shaped the way we work and who does the work. We are a staff of generalists, with backgrounds not only in history but theatre, design, and education. We have "exhibit

## "When I visit an art or history or science museum, what do I see there that I wish our institution could learn to do?"

developers" not "historians." In the field as a whole, there is a similar blurring of boundaries as museum studies and public history programs train students to be experts in museum exhibits more than in specific content fields. Coincidentally or not, in recent years we have seen the rise of museums that transcend entirely the history- art-science-children's museum boundaries: the City Museum in St. Louis, the Japanese American National Museum, and the Spy Museum.

In face of this fluidity, what's left that makes history museums distinctive? Have we learned our lessons so well and expanded our scope so effectively that we don't fit any niche? In the end, I feel, what makes history museums relevant are not the techniques they use but the sorts of stories they can tell. More than science museums and art museums, history institutions deal with content that is familiar, personal, and fundamentally human. They can look not only at cutting-edge pioneers, but the experiences of ordinary people swept up in cutting edge changes. Beyond exploring class, genre, and species or avant-garde and critics, history museums can explore the interplay between individuals and the community. And of course they are uniquely positioned to trace change over time, to show how events unfolded in often unforeseen ways that shaped present-day lives. Finally, with their emphasis on human-level stories, history museums have the ability to engage emotions and to personalize their stories. How did it *feel* to experience these changes? How do these stories from the past resonate with your story?

History museums have borrowed so liberally from other museum disciplines that we may at times seem nearly unrecognizable to ourselves,

but there is a vantage point, a mission, and a set of values that, I believe, gives history museums energy and, I believe, an ongoing place on the cultural landscape.

### ***Deborah Schwartz, Brooklyn Historical Society***

This presentation addressed the qualities and characteristics that are distinctive to an art museum. And how might the uniqueness of the art museum inform (if at all) our understanding of other types of museums?

I have functioned as art museum educator for most of my professional life. But, I have also curated an exhibition in a children's museum, (a very powerful and influential experience) and now I am the president of a historical society. This puts me in a fascinating spot: what will I take with me from my years in art museums— what do I love about them, and what would I want to replicate now that I am liberated from that framework?

We'll start with the obvious: the work of art. A work of art is usually (though not always) a unique object. A work of art often loses at least some of its power and meaning if replicated. It is a quintessential authentic experience—no reproduction, no facsimile, no copy will do. You can capture a symbol of it in a postcard, on a website, or in a PowerPoint, but nothing can replace the experience of the original work of art.

In an art museum visitors sometimes come to revisit paintings and artworks that they have seen before. People who frequent art museums often refer to this phenomenon as "visiting old

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friends." I need to go see Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or I need to revisit Seurat's *La Grand Jatte*. A work of art can also be evocative. It can make us see the world in a way that we have never seen it before: Oscar Wilde said "There was no fog in London before Whistler painted it."

Yet another aspect of visiting art museums is the discovery of the surprising, the unexpected, and sometimes works of art that you hate, that infuriate you. Let's consider the work of The Chapman Brothers, for example. These provocateurs can be as satisfying as the old friends, because they make us think and they demand that we justify our outrage.

Yet another component of the art museum experience is the discovery of new and loved works of art—an artist we have never heard of before, whose work is magical—that transforms us. This transformative experience in an art museum can happen when you least expect it: When I was 10 years old and first saw the paper cut outs of Henri Matisse, or when I was 18 and saw the Japanese scroll paintings illustrating the *Tale of Genji*.

Now each of these magical moments, which took place in an art museum, has characteristics that are worth noting. Each experience is unique, highly personal, not necessarily connected to a larger story or narrative. These experiences, as Elaine Gurian has noted, were not learning experiences in any traditional sense, and my response to these works of art might or might not have prompted me to conduct further research, or learn in any explicit didactic sense.

There are of course opportunities to build knowledge, context, and history out from my

interaction with the work of art, but the point I want to make is that the reaction in itself was worthwhile—I was moved, excited, in body and spirit to believe in beauty, in the ability of human beings to be creative, to celebrate life and (perhaps a bit of a leap for others, but not for me) to work for a better world, because a world that has this much capacity to create, is a world worth preserving so that my children and their children can enjoy the fruits of the human spirit as much as I do or more.

To conclude, let's go back to the original question: What might an art museum take from a history or children's museum and visa versa? In a history museum we might seize the opportunity to build upon the excitement, the pleasure, and the indignation of looking at art and turn each of those into a teachable moment.

I used to think that the profession should leave the distinctive art museum experiences in their place. That we should not try to replicate them, that we should leave art in its non-narrative and authentic space at the art museum. But I believe I was wrong. Our understanding of history

does not have to be exclusively in traditional narrative form. Indeed, it is through works of art by Fred Wilson and Glen Ligon that I believe many people can begin to think more clearly about our history—slavery, racism, and the civil rights movement. These are works of art about the human condition, and if that isn't an essential piece of history, what is?

Art museums are places of quiet, reflection, provocation, and visual discovery. And while our science and history museums do not necessarily state these characteristics as essential to their mission (at least not the quiet part!) the infusion of these characteristics might

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**The Grafter's Shack** by J. Morgan Pruett is part of Wave Hill's explorations of the intersection of nature and art.

well add intriguing components to their already impressive achievements.

Conversely, to those of you who work in art museums I make a plea that you become less afraid of context, of history, and of information sharing. Providing those things to your public will not ruin your great works of art. They

are too powerful and cannot be diminished by giving people a context for which to understand them.

### **Jennifer MacGregor, Wave Hill**

Wave Hill, one of New York City's best-kept secrets, is a 28-acre public garden and cultural center that offers programs in horticulture, environmental education, woodland management, and the visual and performing arts. Although its collections are living plants and trees, it doesn't fit strictly in the mold

of a botanical garden. It draws on the site's unique attributes—the views of the Hudson River, and historic houses—to offer a range of programming to a diverse public. Jennifer MacGregor, Visual Arts Curator, outlined the strategies employed over the past 30 years to exhibit art in this garden context.

In 1977 Wave Hill began organizing annual exhibitions of large-scale, temporary sculpture that used the grounds as a backdrop. With very few opportunities to exhibit outdoors in New York, Wave Hill was at the vanguard of providing opportunities to artists who often exhibited their first significant outdoor works. The shows also attracted an

art world, Manhattan audience, beyond the immediate neighborhood.

The current program, initiated by McGregor in 1999, integrates the exhibitions more closely with Wave Hill's mission, by working with the education department and the garden itself. No longer are the grounds simply a backdrop, but instead a source of connection for the artists who often create new work for the site. Rather than simply offering a selection of contemporary artworks, these exhibits are organized around broad themes that engage the public in a dialogue with nature, culture, and site by building on Wave Hill's distinct context to provide a frame of reference for visiting the garden and the woodlands.

Integrating the visual arts into a non-art institution requires significant leadership, support, and vision. Today, it is an enticing possibility, particularly with so many artists pursuing ideas that relate to science and the humanities, who are eager to work outside of the studio, and engage issues and questions posed by science, history and children's museums.

"A work of art can also be evocative. It can make us see the world in a way that we have never seen it before:"



As an artist in residence at **Wave Hill**, Lisa Murch worked for months to combine invasive plants with everyday crafts materials.