

Exhibition Studies: Issues and Ideas

Weaving Global Perspectives

into the Classroom

by Tiffany Sakato

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By the time Jodie Gorochow graduates with a bachelor's degree in art history and museum studies next spring from the University of Michigan, she will have already lived in three foreign countries and completed three internships related to her interests in museum education and exhibition design. Gorochow, 21, who grew up in Maryland, spent the summer after her freshman year working at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence alongside other interns visiting from Spain and France. The following summer, Gorochow headed to the outskirts of London where she worked at a community gallery, followed by a semester brushing up her Spanish in Madrid and visiting numerous museums on the Iberian Peninsula.

This year marked her first experience at a U.S. cultural institution, the Denver Art Museum, where she assisted with reinstalling its American Indian art collection. Working overseas, Gorochow says she gained a "totally different perspective" on how students from other parts of the world are educated, and also how American museums compare to their European counterparts. Gorochow hopes to continue working in a range of places to learn how museums understand their audiences before committing to graduate school. Already she knows she'll be looking for a culturally diverse cohort and faculty with strong ties to museum studies departments in other countries.

In many ways Gorochow's breadth of experiences and anticipated academic program needs reflect anecdotal observations about tomorrow's emerging museum professionals. Talking with directors of graduate programs indicates that incoming students in general are more traveled than previous generations, and some have the desire to develop international reference points which may serve them well

as museum work expands into new parts of the world. In alignment with this issue's theme of Americans and international work experiences, *Exhibitionist* was curious to explore how museum studies and exhibition design graduate programs are furthering these interests and helping to prepare students to think and operate globally. This article aims to inspire further discussions about the possibilities of American graduate programs facilitating international connections.

One can argue that museum work, and exhibition design in particular, has been and continues to be a natural realm for dialogues about overseas cultural understanding. "In my experience in the last 25 years, there has always been a strong international cross-fertilization in the museum field—and this goes back long before my time," says Marjorie Schwarzer, department chair of John F. Kennedy University's Museum Studies master's degree program. "An international perspective is a consistent part of our program, and something that is embedded in museum studies (as) a way of looking at the world through many lenses and perspectives."

Brenda Cowan, director of the exhibition design program at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, agrees: "Exhibition design is so prevalent around the world that it really lends itself to international exchange pretty easily." Just this May, the American Association of Museums, the umbrella organization that encompasses NAME, convened its annual meeting in sunny Los Angeles. The theme organizers adopted was "Museums without Borders," and it was reflected in the variety of presentations and participants brought together. Also international associations and committees abound in the museum field. A review of the

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Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies website reveals 19 such resources. Several are affiliated with the International Council of Museums, a non-governmental organization created in partnership with UNESCO in 1946.

Students Bring the Global Interest

Enriching this legacy is the fact that some directors are now seeing more students entering graduate school with first-hand experiences of studying and working in other countries, sometimes for relatively long periods. “In the last four years, I’ve been amazed at how much travel students do,” says Polly McKenna-Cress, director of the M.F.A. program in museum exhibition, planning, and design at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The program was founded in 1990, and accepts 9 to 10 students per year. “They just have more access to travel. I haven’t had a student who hasn’t traveled abroad.”

Increased world exposure can encourage a heightened sense of empathy and a desire to understand, interpret, and design museum exhibitions for other cultures, beyond just translating materials into other languages. In graduate school, some students are able to arrange museum internships overseas or execute thesis projects that take on a non-American subject matter. But these choices are typically driven by the individual and then approved by program administrators. Jennifer Maliszewski graduated from the museum studies master’s program at George Washington University in 2009, and is currently working at the American History Museum in Washington, DC. For degree credit, Maliszewski completed a summer internship at the British Museum, alongside two other American classmates from GWU. “My sister lives in London, so I already had a

place to stay. It just kind of worked out nicely,” says Maliszewski. Once she expressed an interest in going abroad, her advisors definitely encouraged her, but the department didn’t push going abroad to everyone. “It was presented as people have done this in the past, it’s different and exciting, be aware that you can go abroad for an internship.” As a graduate student at the University of the Arts, Adam Dotson chose to do his thesis project about Argentina’s Dirty Wars. In 2006, Dotson traveled to Argentina on his own during the summer between his first and second year of school. He then proposed designing an exhibition about the Dirty Wars for both Argentine and U.S. museum audiences. Dotson is multi-lingual, and already had an interest in South American history before getting his master’s degree.

The most likely scenario for museum students is that their involvement in overseas internships and travel is driven by their personal interest and motivation. Alternatively, if a student is from a foreign country, and happens to be studying in the United States, then he or she will be the likely person to do overseas travel and research during the period of U.S. school enrollment. “We don’t have a lot of students saying I’m going to design an exhibit for Brazil, and they grew up in Texas. They’re either from that country, or they’ve experienced that country,” says McKenna-Cress at the University of the Arts. “We don’t force them. We don’t have that agenda.” Overseas experiences in graduate school aren’t for everyone since for the most part students are seeking to gain work experience in American museums, following American standards. Potential overseas options are limited because of language differences, and it also may be very difficult to obtain study or work visas. And with the high cost of graduate school, students may not want the additional

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burden of financing a portion of study outside the U.S.

Using Technology and Developing Class Topics

In addition to the motivation of individual students, some programs are finding ways to use communication technology and introduce exchange programs to expand educational offerings beyond the walls of their classrooms. This spring JFKU's museum studies program initiated an online and on-site hybrid course instructing students in the United Arab Emirates. It was a five-month course on a closed Google site paired with a physical classroom component run at the Emirates Foundation for Philanthropy office in Abu Dhabi. In order to learn about Western museum practices, Emiratis could engage with graduate students at JFKU's Berkeley campus via restricted Internet and postcard communication in accordance with Emirati customs. Depending on future funding, JFKU hopes to continue this form of overseas linking between its students. At JFKU, department chair Marjorie Schwarzer says some American students have been able to work abroad; however, it can be a challenge to get hired. "My understanding is that nations are keenly interested in training their own corps of professionals," she says. "Many museums are part of their nation's patrimony, and there is a degree of nationalism inherent in their design and messages, so there is a need for local talent to carry this message forward."

Experimenting with new technology is a major part of the initial conception of Johns Hopkins University's online master's degree program, as is drawing on global perspectives. The museum studies program launched just two years ago in 2008, and now attracts around 300 part-time students from across the U.S., as well

as a number of students in other countries. "We're really trying to be very innovative and unique," says Phyllis Hecht, program director. "Being online, we really can do that. We have faculty from all over the U.S. and some faculty based in other countries." A potential strength of Johns Hopkins's program is that it is so reliant on the Internet. Students must develop a consistent level of ease and skill using tools such as Adobe Connect, wiki and discussion board pages, VoiceThread, and Pachyderm. These are tools that actual museum directors and their staff might need to know to work in different time zones and locations, according to Hecht. This form of asynchronous work mirrors how overseas collaborations occur on professional projects. Hecht envisions graduates bringing their familiarity with online communication tools into museum workplaces and stimulating forward-thinking application.

One of the four core courses that students can take through Johns Hopkins is called *Museums in a Global Perspective*. It's a 14-week course and is taught by Deborah Howes, assistant program director and full-time faculty member. The course aims to explore how economic, political, technological, and cultural trends affect museum functions around the world. Students work in groups online, research museums in other countries, and role-play as directors of museums working through scenarios. Additionally, Johns Hopkins students are required to do a two-week seminar where they gather face-to-face for the first time, visit museums and meet with senior level staff members, and perform a group project to serve a selected museum. Locations students can choose from have included London, where the seminar focused on what it means to exhibit British heritage. The program hopes to offer future seminars located in Taiwan, Spain, Italy,

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and possibly China. Through its curriculum, Johns Hopkins's program is trying to increase awareness that museums are playing an increasingly critical role in multi-cultural tolerance.

Tapping Into Perspectives Informally

Opportunities for international exchange of ideas come more commonly among museum studies programs through informal ways. Course titles do not necessarily reflect the global perspectives present in the curriculum of programs. However international case studies have always been a part of museum studies curriculum, Schwarzer of JFKU points out. "Museums are a global phenomenon, so if you're talking about repatriation you have to talk about the Elgin Marbles. If you're talking about different exhibition types you have to bring up Europe. Australia has so many cutting edge examples of exhibition design, and so does New Zealand," she says. Bruce Altshuler, who has been the director of New York University's Museum Studies graduate program for the last 10 years and teaches a course on contemporary art exhibitions, says he spends a lot more time talking about international case studies than he used to. "The art world is extremely international. People are always sort of looking around at other sorts of practices. There are so many more contemporary art museums around the world now," he says.

Some graduate programs see themselves as providing the space for encouraging friendships and professional networking that may lead to travel and collaborative projects down the road. Infusing international flavor directly into the classroom has come largely from the gathering of students themselves.

JFKU has always had a strong presence of foreign students mixed with Americans, according to Schwarzer. In the past couple of years, JFKU has trained people from: South Korea, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Afghanistan, Italy, Ireland, Spain, Israel, Palestine, Poland, and Germany. On the opposite coast, academic programs report that through their mixture of student nationalities, an atmosphere of international communication is fostered. This helps lead to discussions about differences in museum marketing and management strategies, funding and development, and audience learning styles.

"The phrase, 'in my country,'—well, that's sort of the starting point for discussion," says Altshuler of NYU. He estimates that a quarter to a third of each incoming class of 40 students is from outside the United States and is often supported by Fulbright or Ford fellowships. The percentage is even higher at FIT. Since 2004, FIT's graduate exhibition design program has included more foreign students than Americans in each cohort. Of a group of 18 students, at times 13 different countries were represented. "Early on, a predominant number of applicants were coming from Asia," says Cowan. "The international draw is one of the cool things about museum studies and exhibition design as a discipline per se. When I have folks coming in from all across the world, and all across the U.S., there are ways of getting them to think of interpretation and storytelling in an exhibition venue that really pulls us together."

Practical Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

The relatively short length of time that

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programs last (1 to 2 years) is one difficulty in being able to implement more curriculum features that would otherwise be on the “wish list.” Also, some students are attracted to programs more for their local resources and internship opportunities, even if foreign opportunities were available. Opportunities for further development might include being able to offer more program-sponsored overseas internships and exchanges. NYU already offers an internship at a historic house in Florence, and the University of the Arts is considering a similar program-sponsored experience in Italy and Istanbul. FIT is exploring internship possibilities for its students in Asia. At Johns Hopkins University, administrators are interested in creating research collaborations that would not require any travel, but still bring museum studies students from other programs together.

Working internationally can take shape in various ways and doesn’t mean moving to another country and getting hired as a full-staff employee, all program directors are quick to express. Often that can be the most challenging route, especially without having some sort of connection be it language, personal, or other unique ability in demand. If students are interested in working abroad, they may become consultants or be hired by American firms dealing with overseas clients, traveling exhibits, or loaned-out collections. Also, working in America, students can anticipate getting involved in museum projects that exhibit other cultures as well as designing for a whole range of international and domestic visitors.

NYU graduate student Maureen Regalie realized this first-hand while working briefly for the Science Museum of Minnesota. “There were a lot of immigrant groups that would use the

Science Museum. Hmong and Somali students and families would frequently come to the museum and participate in events,” says Regalie. “I guess I’ve always been internationally minded, but it was particularly interesting to see how the museum adapted to the international needs of its local audience, including adding artifacts from these foreign cultures into its collection and displaying them prominently.” Regalie says this experience made her more alert to and interested in understanding wider audience appeal. In the spring she took an exhibition planning and design course and worked on a team with a South African classmate. The team had to conceptualize an exhibit, drawing from a collection devoted to New York seaport history. “We were going through the collection, and this student came back saying, ‘I was really intrigued by the collection of wooden eagles.’ The Americans in the group just looked at each other like, ‘The eagles?’” Regalie says, laughing. “To us, of course there are going to be eagles on American ships. It’s the national bird. It was interesting that something we considered so mundane was intriguing to someone from a different national background.”

The eagles eventually made it into the final exhibit plan, and the class project experience highlighted for Regalie how assumptions cannot easily be made about what appeals to audiences in new or overlooked ways. “With the whole globalization of our generation, international travel and interaction with people from other cultures is not such a rare thing anymore,” says Regalie. “This will hopefully positively affect museum work in the future in creating cross-cultural awareness. By this I mean creating a museum that’s created not just assuming one culture, but for an international audience.” ✨