

# Exhibition Critiques:

## MN150

by Roger Barrett, Liza Pryor, and  
Jeanne W. Vergeront

### **MN150: A Visitor-Curated Exhibition** by Roger Barrett

The *MN150* exhibition was launched as a celebration of the Sesquicentennial of the State of Minnesota. The exhibition presents 150 people, places, things, and events that brought change to their local communities, the state, or the world. What's unique is that it was created by more than 2,700 nominations from Minnesota citizens. Their voices are found throughout the exhibition, and visitors are encouraged to share their own stories about the state.

#### **Engaging Content**

As a Minnesota native, I have to admit to a certain bias for the exhibition. I found the content to be relevant and personal, triggering fond memories of recent and childhood times. I enjoyed discovering new facts about the state I grew up in, and re-discovering things that I had forgotten. I loved seeing familiar objects like the Betty Crocker cookbook on display (a staple in my childhood kitchen), and the addition of a panel detailing the evolution of "Betty" herself was a terrific sidebar.

#### **Exhibition Design**

I thought the choice of materials was appropriate. The use of maple plywood, galvanized steel, along with simple steel frames and straight-forward Phillips-head fasteners reminded me of something constructed by my father in my boyhood garage—but with enough sophistication to make it feel finished and appropriate for an exhibition. The overall color palette and graphic style were pleasing and complimentary to the objects. Choosing warm

yellows and reds with touches of olive green was a great backdrop to the many black and white and sepia toned historical photographs.

I think the designers could have spent more time thinking about the topography of the exhibition. A large majority of the cases were built at the same height, which visually gave precedence to the few things occupying vertical space, and let everything below that line blend into boxes that were pretty much indistinguishable from each other. They didn't invite the visitor to move through the exhibition in one way or another.

I would have liked designers to utilize the vertical space better. There were a few large objects (a canoe, a wheel chair) and fabric banners hanging from the ceiling, but the gallery height is sufficient that vertical space could have been utilized to provide anchor points for exhibit clusters below—helping visitors navigate the space.

Some exhibits had great verticality that would have been better appreciated out in the open. For example, a component highlighting the demise of one of Minneapolis architectural gems—the Metropolitan Building—was placed against a wall. The exhibit had a stunning photograph of the building interior that would have been beautifully presented hung from the ceiling—using the architecture of the gallery to highlight the architecture shown in the historical image.

One case where the space was very well utilized presented stories of Minnesota's harsh weather as a catalyst for invention and exploration. The designers created a large, circular platform divided in half by a floor-to-ceiling white scrim. On one half of the platform was a display

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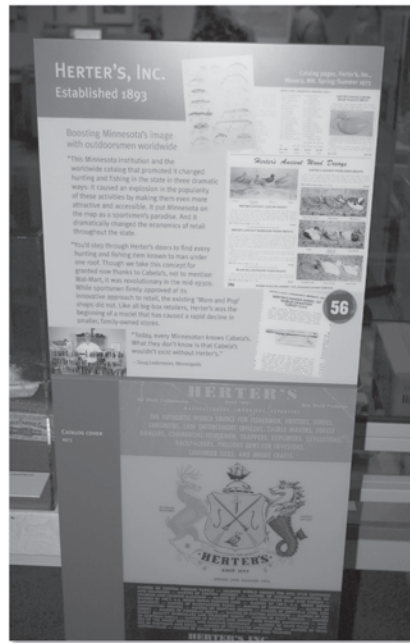
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*We asked three seasoned professionals with varied expertise to write critiques using the following guideline: A critique is an individual viewpoint, shaped by expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. It involves your analysis of the exhibition, and your assessment of its strengths and weaknesses from your personal and professional viewpoint—as a designer, an educator, an exhibit developer, or whatever your area of expertise. The Editor*



Vistors were encouraged to record a video about what they would add to the exhibition. Though a great way to incorporate visitor content, I would have liked an additional feedback-based component—a comment book or a kiosk where visitors could cast votes for runner-up stories.



While the palette and typography were legible and complementary to the photos and objects, cutting the amount of copy would have helped them shine. All images courtesy of Roger Barrett.

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I imagine the decision to create this arrangement was quite intentional, but then why was a number assigned to each component? If there was a paper guide to the exhibits, it wasn't easily located. Regardless, I don't believe an exhibition should rely on a key to tell a complete story. In addition, more thought could have been given to visitor navigation. There is a virtual sea of vitrines, densely populating a relatively small space. There are very few visual clues that give a visitor a sense of area themes, or clusters of exhibit content.

Designers made good attempts to make the exhibition accessible to a broad audience. In particular, I was impressed with a ramp up to the back of a vintage greyhound bus where I could watch historical footage out the window. The designers were thoughtful about utilizing the ramp space for exhibits--it felt integral to the exhibition, rather than a "we better make this exhibit ADA compliant" afterthought. Seats were removed from the bus to provide ample room for a wheelchair or scooter.

### The Stories

I was delighted to see such a broad range of topics explored, and that a diverse cross-section of Minnesota was represented. I was able to reminisce fondly about my home state (Prince, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and Paul Wellstone) and discover some Minnesota history unknown to me—Xang Vang, for instance, a community organizer charged with helping the Hmong immigrant community adopt modern farming practices.

The main copy point of the topic panels is a quotation from the "citizen curator" who nominated the person, place, thing, or event for inclusion in the exhibition. It was a great

devoted to the importance of the snowmobile to Minnesota; the other half a display of equipment used by modern explorer Ann Bancroft. This was well executed. I was able to see immediately how important snow equipment is to the average Minnesotan seeking winter fun and to an adventurer whose first priority is survival. At the same time I could observe the evolution of such equipment from its inception to its modern manifestation. The use of the white scrim gave me a sense of snow, and provided some much needed visual resting space.

### Navigating the Space

I had mixed feelings about how the 150 stories were arranged. The very first thing I noticed about the exhibition arrangement was that the stories weren't in sequential order (#21 was next to #89, for example), but rather arranged thematically (political activists together, agricultural events together, etc). Initially, I was frustrated by this, thinking I was going to miss something. In the end, I found myself being forced to retrace my steps—looking for things I may have missed. As a result I found myself going back to the same components and discovering new things—sort of like picking up a conversation hours after it had seemingly ended.

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[The interactives] were well done and considerably expanded my experience.

touch, emphasizing that the exhibition's content was born from ordinary Minnesotans and not history experts.

The stories are rich with personal touches: dusty old photographs, dug-out-of-the attic mementos, video clips, original art, even taxidermy animals—maybe too rich. The sheer volume of photographs, words, and objects in *MN150* is overwhelming. It is difficult to know where one story ends and another begins. Graphic panels are so dense with type and images, they more closely resemble magazine pages than museum labels. The combination of a gallery stuffed with same-height cases and jam-packed graphics left me yearning for some white space—a place to rest my eye between components.



*A simple but well-executed display.*

### The Interactives

The exhibition was generally static and didactic, punctuated by several interactive components. While none of these were particularly complicated, they were well done and considerably expanded my experience.

A large scale quiz show theater (complete with seats rescued from the original Guthrie Theater) was a great place to rest and test my knowledge of all things Minnesotan. Besides being perfectly kitschy (oh yah sure you betcha), it was a great social experience—visitors were quick to share stories while competing with one another.

Another well done, simple interactive was the “toys on a conveyor belt” vitrine. I did nothing more than turn several cranks to watch a collection of plastic tchotchkes pass through the case, but the act of creating motion turned them into sort of a movable timeline of souvenirs. And having several belts and cranks, again, made this an experience that could be shared by multiple visitors.

Overall, I think the exhibition was solid—nothing exceptional or groundbreaking—but I enjoyed the overall design approach, and found the decision to use a “non-museum” voice intriguing. Had the designers paid a little more attention to how visitors navigate the space, and the copywriters done a little editing, I would have given the exhibition an even more favorable review.



*This photograph of the Metropolitan Building would have been beautifully presented hung from the ceiling rather than against a wall.*

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The lack of a strong, overarching narrative, and the randomness of content that make the show egalitarian are the two big drawbacks to the exhibition as well.

(continued from page 85)

Overall, I think MN150 is an experiment that doesn't quite work.

## **MN150** **by Liza Pryor**

Oh, Minnesota History Center, I love the risks you take. And, Minnesota History Center, I'm so sad when they don't pay off!

**MN150** is a beautiful concept. "Explore 150 people, places, and things that make Minnesota Minnesota." Not bowled over yet? There's more. See, the final list of 150 was compiled from more than 2,700 nominations provided by Minnesotans all over the world. Can you imagine a better way to involve Minnesotans in the process of Minnesota history than letting them help choose the people, places, and things that "define" Minnesota? From the **MN150** website<sup>1</sup>:

*[Minnesota Historical] Society Director Nina Archabal describes [MN150] as "unprecedented in the degree of public participation." Delighting in its hometown nature, she asks, "Who better to tell us about Minnesota than the people who live here?"*

*A committee of Minnesota Historical Society staff, community members and subject experts selected the final list of 150, basing their choice on the compelling case made by the nominator as well as the potential for each topic to be developed into a successful exhibit component. Nominations included in the exhibit cover a wide range of categories, from sports events, to political figures and pop icons, to inventors and their inventions, to lasting examples of cultural traditions.*

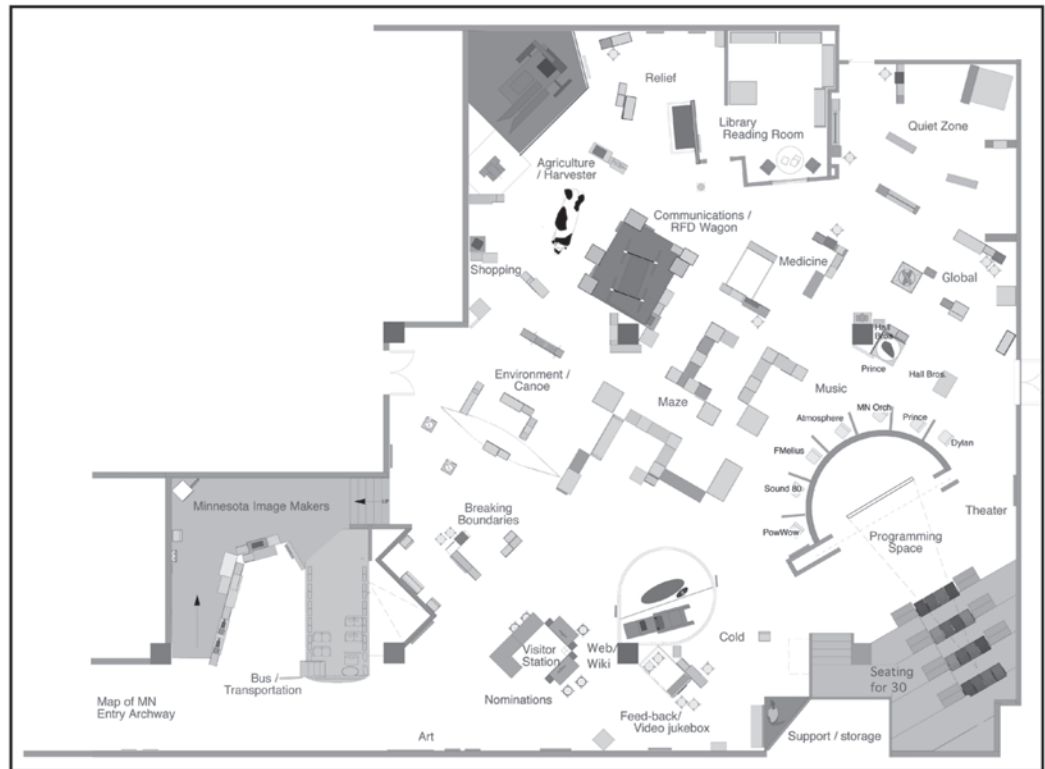
The messy process yielded an exhibition with a simple message: "What do Prince, the GPS system, Hubert H. Humphrey and the 1980 Olympic Hockey Team have in common? They all changed Minnesota."

### **The Good**

The same egalitarian spirit that prompted the nominations runs through the exhibition.

Each of the 150 people, places, and things is treated the same, label-wise. They're all the same size; "Lutheranism," for example, gets the same wall real estate (on the main label, anyway) as, say, "Munsingwear" or "Burma Shave." And each label has two voices: the winning nomination, along with a photo of the person who submitted it, as well as information and photos in a more traditional museum voice. The labels, simple and similar, are associated with objects and photos of different scales (although most of the vitrines are the same size). Each label has a number, but the numbers aren't presented in any order. None of the people, places, or things seems more or less important than any of the others. Instead, you're left to browse your way through the exhibition, and the randomness is wonderful. What do you think of when you think "Minnesota"? Chances are, whatever you're imagining is represented somewhere, and the hunt is the fun part.

And the exhibition includes a lovely quiz show game. Eighteen players sit in stadium seats, with buttons on the arms, and compete against each other to answer ten questions about people, places, and things of importance in MN history. Questions range from the obscure "Gracia Countryman earned distinction for being<sup>2</sup>....," to the obvious "Itasca State Park is home to<sup>3</sup>....," to the popular "Who starred in the 1984 movie



MN150 Floorplan. Courtesy Minnesota History Center.

‘Purple Rain’<sup>4</sup>?” with a bonus question “The movie was filmed in which nightclub?”. The quiz is utterly engaging. When I played, visitors were laughing at the funny potential answers to the multiple-choice questions, discussing their options, and, since the scoring is public, congratulating each other for answering correctly.

### The Bad

Some things are better in theory than they are in practice. The lack of a strong, overarching narrative, and the randomness of content that make the show egalitarian are the two big drawbacks to the exhibition as well.

No topic in the show is elevated above any other, and the contributions from the public, while interesting, have the same status as the museum-developed content. Generally, I don’t mind the lack of heavy-handed curatorial content, but without a strong sense of Minnesota history of your own, *MN150* can feel like so much bar trivia. Even though the people, places, and things are individually compelling, I wanted a bigger narrative—some explanation of *why* Minnesota has been home to the innovations, movements, and people that it has.

By randomness, I mean, for example, that each label has a number, but the numbers don’t mean anything. #1 is “the American Indian Movement” and #150 is “Theodore Wirth,” but they’re not in order of importance, or chronological, or grouped in any obvious way. (There *are* groupings, in fact, but they’re subtle and easy to miss.) I found it tremendously disorienting, and I constantly had to fight the urge to try to follow the numbers in order. Even when I was determined to embrace the randomness, I longed for some way to see how the stories related to each other. I found myself wishing for some sort of game I could overlay—something like “six degrees of Kevin Bacon”—where a historian could show me the unexpected connections between the people, places, and things.

The space seems to have been designed for a different exhibition. There’s a ramped area that serves to provide access to the Greyhound bus, and an area with walls that suggest a schoolhouse, but the architectural elements don’t help to anchor the exhibition. And while some objects are bigger than others, there’s an overall lack of difference in scale. All the cases are the same, or similar, resulting in a maze

All the cases are the same, or similar, resulting in a maze of object cases.



I loved the idea of the wiki as an extension of the egalitarian ethos that pervades the exhibition, but it's obviously not intended to work as a wiki in the public exhibition.

(continued from page 87)

You've demonstrated a deep respect for your visitors and a willingness to embrace technologies and processes that other museums shy away from

of object cases. The exhibition is full of cool stuff, but you can get lost in it and find yourself wondering if you missed anything.

Strangely, I was also a little unclear about which objects were real and which were replicas. I'm pretty sure that Prince's iconic outfit from the movie "Purple Rain" is real, but what about Walter Mondale's Vice Presidential papers? It's understandable that they're perhaps Xeroxes, but that makes them less, somehow, than the real deal.

There are some larger object displays, and you can go inside the Greyhound bus or into the Quiz Show theater, but the exhibition doesn't feel immersive. There are a few small-scale interactives—mostly maps or listening stations—but it doesn't feel like there's much to do. And the Minnesota History Center is known for excellent object theaters, but MN150 doesn't include one.

#### **The Innovative**

The exhibition includes two components that made me sit up and take notice.

#### **Video Booth**

In a video booth, visitors are invited to nominate people, places, or things that should have been included. On the outside of the booth, you can watch the videos. They aren't moderated immediately, so you can watch your contribution right away. That's the great part. (It looks like History Center staff *do* moderate the videos regularly, deleting the inappropriate or off-topic ones, but of the 20 videos available to me on the touch screen, six were recorded that day, none of them keepers, and there were a few losers from the previous day as well.) Each video is represented by a still, and

it's fun to try to predict what the video will suggest by looking at the person who recorded it. But the video booth is tucked into a corner, which might encourage some less-than-ideal behavior. In fact, while I waited to check out the video nominations, an older couple recorded themselves kissing in the booth, then stood in front of the touch screen using their cell phones to make videos of the video they'd made of themselves kissing. Probably not what the developers intended, huh? The whole exhibition is a set-up for the question visitors are prompted to answer, and the interface is lovely and simple, but the visitor-contributed content still isn't stellar. Hey, MNHS, consider moving the booth to a higher-traffic area, and see what happens—it could be great!

#### **Wiki**

The exhibition also includes a wiki. In my experience, curators tend to be uncomfortable with user-contributed content, and yet the Minnesota History Center staff included a wiki right in the middle of the exhibition. What a pleasant departure from the expected! The wiki contains all the topics nominated for inclusion in the exhibition. You're prompted to look around, and then leave your comments. Each entry includes the winning nomination, the curatorial label, some history, resource links and media, and sections where users can share memories or make notes. You can also add new entries. I was excited; I wanted to leave a memory of Warren MacKenzie, utilitarian potter and #81 in the exhibition. But you can't do anything except browse existing content without creating an account and logging in. So I tried. I use wikis and blogs every day, and it took me four tries. I don't imagine that the casual user is that motivated.

## I found **MN150** to be an enjoyable meander across the state and over time through the eyes and hearts of 150 people...

The keyboard, while durable and likely maintenance-free, is absolutely horrible to type on<sup>5</sup>. And once I'd added my story and logged out, the computer appeared to cache my private information (user name and E-mail address) in a public way. (Perhaps those fields clear eventually?) I loved the idea of the wiki as an extension of the egalitarian ethos that pervades the exhibition, but it's obviously not intended to work as a wiki in the public exhibition. If nothing else, visitors should be able to leave questions or share memories without creating accounts. (C'mon, MNHS: if you're willing to moderate video, moderating text should be a walk in the park.)

### The Take Away

Overall, I think **MN150** is an experiment that doesn't quite work. But I say that with sadness and admiration. It's a *good* failure. The absolute best kind. After all, if exhibitions and components don't fail occasionally, it's proof that their developers aren't taking risks or pushing boundaries. And Minnesota History Center, you *are*. You've demonstrated a deep respect for your visitors and a willingness to embrace technologies and processes that other museums shy away from. I can't wait to see what you come up with next.

## MINNESOTA MEANDER

**Jeanne W. Vergeront**

The tidy, compressed title, **MN150**, barely hints at everything this exhibition holds for visitors. Certainly it suggests a celebration of Minnesota's 2008 sesquicentennial. Developed by Minnesota Historical Society, highlights of 150 years of statehood are a pretty good bet. State residents and tourists would not be

disappointed. On my first, second, and third visit I found **MN150** to be an enjoyable meander across the state and over time through the eyes and hearts of 150 people who nominated a Minnesota person, place, thing, or event that sparked change in Minnesota or the world.

At the entry, a sign serves as an advanced organizer and provides background on the exhibition.

What Minnesota person, place, thing, or event sparked change here or around the world?

Nearly 3,000 people answered that question. We picked 150 of those answers for this exhibit.

We picked a range of changes representing every corner of the state.

We picked small changes that had powered results, and well-known stories worth another telling.

Most of all, we picked a collection of topics, each suggested by someone like you, that would spark conversation and debate.

As you visit this exhibit, ask yourself, What's in my **MN150**?

The exhibition responds to these questions with 150 nomination stations in a 5,000 ft<sup>2</sup> gallery. In a small theater area for the Minnesota 150 Challenge, in a recording booth for "What's in My **MN150**?" and at a staffed resource desk with manipulatives, catalogue, and locator map the exhibition skillfully repeats and varies what people celebrate about Minnesota.

### **MN150** Makes a Promise and Keeps It

Stepping through a giant cut-out state map, passing the Greyhound Bus (#51) and nodding to children's book illustrator Wanda Gag (#

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup><http://www.mnhs.org/exhibits/mn150/>

<sup>2</sup>She was Minneapolis' pioneering public librarian, responsible for introducing the first children's reading room.

<sup>3</sup>The headwaters of the Mississippi River

<sup>4</sup>Prince. And the nightclub was First Avenue.

<sup>5</sup>I sympathize. We use these same keyboards for the Science Buzz components over at the Science Museum of Minnesota, and I'm sure our visitors have the same complaint.





Visitors explore their own **MN150** through maps, booklets, specimens, and responsive staff. Courtesy of Jeanne Vergeront.

(continued from page 89)

For me, however, the exhibition was not really about objects. Rather it was about the nominations and the nominators.

43), I found myself mentally revisiting the entry sign. Its six clear sentences became an accountability statement for me, a promise of what the exhibition intended to deliver. This seemingly simple approach manages to embrace the famous and the obscure in Minnesota in an engaging way. A prominently displayed numbering system is integrated with graphics at each nomination station, helping to hold together the exhibition's great variety. The assurance of 150 nominations meant that whether I was looking at #36 (Ensilage Harvester) or #110 (Powwows), I knew there were 149 other nominations to visit.

Spanning the state, time, and scale, the 150 choices represent Minnesota's natural history and abundant resources, its evolving economic base, its people and their contributions, and a social fabric—all of which have shaped Minnesota. A promise of reaching the corners of the state was easily kept with entries from the Jeffers Petroglyphs (# 67) in southwest Minnesota and the Split Rock Light House (#126) on Lake Superior's North shore. Though not expressly covered in the promise, nominations span the millennia from Ancient Tropical Sea (#2) to the 2005 State of MN vs. Philip Morris (#128). Nominations vary in scale, from Glaciation (#47), to Lutheranism

(#80), the Honeywell Round Thermostat (#60), and Tonka Trucks (#167).

I wondered whether a range of choices was truly represented and how their significance was characterized. It would be easy for passion or personal interest rather than impact to inspire nominations. Many nominations were saluted for leadership, innovation, or for maintaining cultural traditions. Occasionally a single sentence captured an enormous impact as for John Thomas (#130) who "... helped save the lives of nearly 4 million people during the course of the Cold War."

Sharing what people feel is important in the place they call home taps into a deep well of feeling and for **MN150** creates a strong personal and social dimension. Moving through the exhibition, I heard a variety of emotional responses, conversations, and if not precisely debates, questions and comparisons.

Laughter rippled from a family group encountering SPAM (#124), one of Minnesota's much maligned exports. A ten-year old boy released a high-pitched "Eeeyewwww!" as he came upon a multi-colored old fashion bra and girdle (with garters) produced by Munsingwear (#97). A couple shared an uncertain silence at the 1920 Duluth Lynchings (#34). Two older men compared the size of the Snowmobile (#120) with that of a friend's. Quiet reflection at Unknown Champions (#135) recognized "...the people who may not be remembered by history, even in their own communities, but who were essential to building Minnesota and making it what it is."

A family's participation in the **MN150** Challenge was punctuated with "I got it! I got it! I got it!"