Historical Friction: Chicago Perspective

by Phyllis Rabineau in conversation with Rosemary Adams, Tamara Biggs, Julie Katz, D. Lynn McRainey, Dan Oliver, and John Russick

In the last months of 2009, seven museum colleagues came together for a conversation about the tensions that are unique to history exhibitions. Each of us has been at the Chicago History Museum (CHM) for at least ten years, some for quite a bit longer. We've produced dozens of exhibitions together, and we plan to produce many more. Friction is a familiar texture in the fabric of our daily work life. Some of our most frequent challenges are inherent in our conflicting goals of both preserving objects and also presenting them to the public in engaging ways. These struggles would be familiar to staff in other collections-rich museums, particularly art and natural history museums, and despite our considerable expertise and creativity we sometimes fail to find solutions that completely satisfy both sides of the equation. Other stress points derive from schedule and budget; we're a small staff, supporting an active exhibition program in a very competitive marketplace. Yet other tensions derive from strong personalities, with differing passions, commitments, and viewpoints. We're not a passive crowd, and most of us are trained in disciplines—whether academic scholarship or design critique—where questioning, debate, and argument are a way of life. Not coincidentally, these traits also characterize the discipline of history itself.

But what (if any) frictions are unique to the exhibitions we make? Are there attributes of a history collection that introduce characteristic tensions to our process? Do issues related to interpretation (for example, shared authority) play out in specific ways? Extending our appeal to new audiences is an important priority, but still a work-in-progress; what frictions does it contribute to our process? We shared these questions ahead of time, and they resonated differently for each of the partners in the conversation. I listened as my co-workers explored the issues, and I have distilled highlights from the transcript for our contribution to ***Exhibitionist's*** issue on this topic.

Stories as "Objects": New Interpretive and Design Challenges

Much discussion centered on the role a history museum plays in its community. In formats such as neighborhood history, we have for many years included multiple voices in shaping our exhibitions. While these projects, based in methodologies such as oral history, open new interpretations, they also challenge staff and visitors to think about the museum's authority, and history itself, in different ways.

> John Russick: In the history museum, peoples' stories aren't just the window-dressing or the context for objects, they are the "thing" itself. Stories present challenges because collecting them is time-consuming, because we don't "own" them in the same way museums "own" their traditional collections, and because they're harder to get your hands around, and to interpret.
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> Julie Katz: We've collected oral histories for many years, and they're an important part of the museum's research collection, but I agree that we've struggled with how to translate them into exhibition formats.
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> Rosemary Adams: I think the effort of collecting oral histories is taking on even more importance as we look at contemporizing history and bringing current voices to it. We still collect objects, but oral histories are becoming a more and more valuable resource.

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Are there attributes of a history collection that introduce characteristic tensions to our process?

John Russick: I've also had experiences where people I was interviewing didn't want to share their stories because they didn't see the historical significance. They just saw these stories as their life. We try to convince people that they are part of history, but it's hard to do if they don't recognize that their day-to-day struggles—for example, to raise kids, or to have a business—are history.

Tamara Biggs: People go through their lives and just chuck things because they don't realize those things will have value later on, so sometimes peoples' memories are all we have. For example, when I worked at Burger King in the 1970s I had my hot pants uniform, but as soon as I left that job I chucked it right away, never wanted to see it again. Now I think wow, what a picture of the 70s that would be!

Julie Katz: Maybe it's different for a local historical society, but in a big history museum, people hesitate to think that they are part of it. I think that also applies to peoples' notion of what belongs in a museum. We've all seen when an object that was in someone's house is taken into the collection; suddenly it's being handled with white gloves, and a transformation happens.

Dan Oliver: It becomes elevated, or anointed.

Lynn McRainey: How important is it for us to have the stuff? A few years ago, I was a guest at the history museum in Brisbane, Australia where the staff was questioning their assumptions about collecting. They knew they would never be able to collect everything of significance so they were investigating a process that might train residents how to care for their own collections, with the museum creating a database to track who has what. The idea was that a museum might document objects, but wouldn't take ownership of them.

Objects, Ideas, or Audiences? What Guides the Process?

In one variant after another, the practice of collecting and interpreting contemporary history was woven throughout the conversation. In contrast, it took some time before the topics of audience and experience came up:

Dan Oliver: A pervasive tension in our exhibition process is between an object-based approach and an idea-based approach; people on our staff are at various points in the spectrum that spans these methods. Often, object-based exhibitions are our default, because that's where many staff members feel the most comfort. Their discomfort begins when we talk about interactivity, or when we talk about an exhibition as an experience. There's a range of views, and we're not all on the same page. Every project feels different, based on who's in the room to discuss the issues. One specific tension is the idea of authenticity. When we fabricate an experience, there's anxiety that it's not an authentic experience.

Lynn McRainey: Instead of a continuum of object to idea, I see it more as a triangle, and the third part of the picture is the audience. I don't think it's an issue unique to history museums, but generally we do start exhibitions either from an object or an idea, instead of looking holistically and asking which audience we want to serve, before we go to object or idea.

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The questions, "*Who* are we for?" and "*How* should we be for them?" are among the most challenging for us, and perhaps for most history museums. For many years, adults have comprised the majority of our visitors, and serving them continues to dominate much of our thinking about exhibitions. For example, although students comprise a nearly-equal proportion of our visitors, and are arguably the audience where we achieve our most meaningful impact, we're still learning how to put them, as well as an increasingly numerous audience of children and families, at the center of our development and design process. We haven't yet developed a shared understanding and vision of our audiences, and our dialogue on this subject is still in a very formative stage.

Objects: Who or What Gives them Meaning?

In contrast, it's very easy for CHM's staff to frame a debate about interpreting the meanings inherent in objects.

> John Russick: One challenge is to try to breathe life into objects that are not particularly interesting. A characteristic of history collections is that they include a lot of mass-produced stuff, not one of a kind or unique – maybe an object is the only one that has survived, but perhaps 500,000 were originally made.
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> Phyllis Rabineau: That was a difference I experienced when I came here from an anthropology collection, where everything was made by somebody. You can see the makers' fingerprints on many things in the Field Museum collection. Many of those objects are arguably art, or at the very least have meaning as objects, but here, many of the objects don't seem to me to have meaning in the same way.
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> Julie Katz: But there are different levels of personal meaning. Our ***Crossroads*** exhibition on Chicago history is filled with mass-produced things, but you can see visitors in that exhibition making connections when they recognize objects or events that their family members experienced. You can hear people say, "My parents came here on their honeymoon to see the World's Fair of 1933." So there can be a personal connection with mass-produced pieces.
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> John Russick: The biggest challenge we have is to infuse the objects with meaning—go beyond it was made in Chicago, or it was used by so-and-so, or it was purchased in Marshall Field's. History also means that there is love, anger, fear, or other emotions buried in these objects. The opportunity is that visitors have memories related to these objects, where you don't get that connection in natural history museums.
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> Lynn McRainey: I think history museums also struggle with the concept of Place, with creating an exhibition environment that frames not only the stories but also the objects that have become, as Dan says, anointed by entering our collection. We help these objects maintain their anointed status when we put them in display cases, but if we blindfolded someone and put them into one of our exhibitions, and asked, "Are you in Philadelphia or Chicago?" would they know the difference? Events happen somewhere, and objects were used someplace, but we struggle to present that.

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Lisa Wai Lau, a traditional herbalist, provided one of the oral histories at the heart of the Chicago History Museum exhibition, **My Chinatown.** *Photograph by Dan Oliver, Courtesy Chicago History Museum.*

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Phyllis Rabineau: We're at a disadvantage because this building isn't a Place with any significant connections. We're not located in an historic site, where something did really happen. Instead, we're in a generic building, and that makes it more difficult to evoke and interpret Place from the perspective of history or memory.

Rosemary Adams: I guess we think the artifacts have that power. We can show the real artifacts and there's something to seeing the Lincoln death bed although it's not in the Peterson Boarding House where he died.

John Russick: The Lincoln death bed is a Place! You can't get in it, but it is the place where he died.

What Does History Mean? To Us ...and to Our Visitors?

Like academic historians, we thrive on debating theoretical aspects of history and its interpretation.

John Russick: I think we struggle with what history means to us and, consequently, how to present it to our visitors. Are we trying to get people to think about history, to tell them why history is significant, or are we trying to give them answers? Mostly I think we emphasize our role as experts, rather than presenting history in a way that encourages people to draw their own conclusions or find their own path. We may not mean it, but I think we send out the message that our interpretation of history is probably better than yours

Lynn McRainey: I don't think we've ever had a real discussion about how we are going to teach history, yet it's a question that is implicit all the time. Everyone has their own personal definition, but do we have a shared philosophy about it? We shouldn't be addressing it on a per project basis, we should embrace what we think is powerful about history and try more consciously to define it and use it.

Rosemary Adams: If you looked at the exhibitions currently on view here, you'd see a range of approaches. ***Abraham Lincoln Transformed*** is all about presenting a story —we think it's a fresh take on Lincoln, but we're basically saying "here is the history, we are presenting it." On the other hand, ***My Chinatown*** is about joining together with a group of people to tell a history.

Tamara Biggs: Any exhibition will have a point of view. If we reveal it, the audience will know there's somebody saying this, and they can either buy it or not buy it. There's something to be said for making those views evident. Even in ***My Chinatown,*** although it's based on peoples' narratives, we manipulated those stories—we chose them and edited them, so we are part of the perspective that is presented.

Abraham Lincoln's death bed suggests different interpretive strategies: Is it an object? A place? A story? Photo credit: Chicago History Museum.

Dan Oliver: We do tend to be more conservative when we feel there are expectations to meet. When we do exhibitions about Lincoln, we know that the audience expects to see certain objects from our collection such as the bed he died in. On the other hand, for exhibitions on communities, while we're freer to experiment with how we tell stories, these exhibitions tend to be more celebratory, and we shy away from sensitive issues such as criminal activity.

Rosemary Adams: Often, when we do bring up difficult issues, such as gentrification, we maintain a distance. We tend to report "this happened" instead of exploring all the still-relevant political and social dimensions of it. I think we've learned that these projects are not just a way to expose CHM visitors to different communities, but also a way to give those communities a presence here. When we were planning our first series of neighborhood exhibitions in the 1990s, we talked about making displays for sites in the neighborhoods that would have an ongoing presence. But a lot of people in the neighborhoods didn't care about that; what mattered to them was being in this museum. It surprised the staff, because we had the assumption that it was important to reach out into the neighborhoods.

John Russick: That goes back to the issue Julie was talking about, being "blessed" by the museum, the sense that being included means my object or story is significant. So many of these issues relate to collecting and interpreting contemporary history: it's a little too close, too recent, and it's hard to have enough distance to make good choices. Part of what we want to say is that the past isn't done. History didn't happen in the past, it happens now. Our job is to interpret the past today. These events still have relevance for us now, but what we're interested in getting from them is different because of the time in which we live.

Let's Talk More

As the conversation ended, we recognized how much it contrasted with the realities of our daily interaction. Far from dialogues about the push-pull tensions between past and present, our ongoing conversation is far more focused on mundane struggles. Lynn McRainey remarked: "This conversation reveals what we each grapple with silently or maybe over lunch with a colleague, but rarely with a group. Meetings are consumed with floor plans, object lists, and concept bubbles. Typically we have to hit the ground running and miss the opportunity to discuss significant issues like these."

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