Making Room by Letting Go: A Look at the Ephemerality of Collections

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By Sheila A. Brennan

We all agree that the material culture evidence held by museums and historical societies is critical in understanding our pasts. Objects speak for individuals whose lives were not documented in other ways, and can speak emotions unavailable in the written record. The volume of material culture produced today is more sizable than ever. Which leads to two unanswered questions: How well are our collections policies at museums and historical societies working? And are we collecting the material culture evidence that will help future historians interpret the lives of early 21st-century Americans?

In conversations with historians, curators, and state humanities council representatives, I have learned of two troubling trends: 1.) most small and mid-size cultural heritage...
organizations serving local and regional constituencies are not actively collecting, and 2.) existing collections are not being used, and in some cases, are deteriorating.

Many memory institutions do not have the space, the curatorial staff, and/or the money to collect objects from the recent past. Museums that want to diversify their existing collections to better represent the complex histories of their communities face similar problems.

Public historian and former curator Alison Marsh recently documented some of these problems at the nation’s largest institution of memory: the Smithsonian Institution. Marsh learned firsthand that as curatorial positions disappear, objects become orphaned. No one advocates for those objects, and so they are left out of physical exhibits and digital collections. Collecting in the engineering division, for example, was once very active, and now is nonexistent.

“The Smithsonian is not where we store the remnants of what we have forgotten. It’s where we go when we want to remember. Its curators help us access and interpret our country’s collective memory.”

Maintaining collections and their curators is costly.

As fewer dollars are dedicated to preservation and conservation activities, collections of all types sit unused and sometimes decay in storage areas. The Heritage Health Index report from 2005 found the state of preservation funding to be exceedingly low, and that millions of cultural heritage collections are in danger because of poor conditions and lack of preventive care. On average, U.S. historical societies spend 12 percent and museums spend 9 percent of their budgets on preservation activities. There are problems of expertise, care, storage, space, and use.

Is conserving every collection object forever a sustainable practice?
To think through some of these challenges we need to think radically about current collections policies to see how we can both increase access to existing collections while making room for new ones.

**Publish collections records online.**

Take collections records, warts and all, and make that metadata and the digital reference image accessible on the open web. Take a short video of an object to represent its size, shape, contours, and functionality and save it alongside its record.

Chances are, many objects are sitting in storage areas making this cultural heritage already invisible. Make it visible and accessible digitally.

**Take objects out of storage, or out of cases and let them degrade gracefully.**

By no means am I arguing for a fire sale, nor am I asking for everything to be crammed into an exhibition. But it might be time to make some decisions about the content of existing collections.

By making more objects available, visitors can truly interact with the things that drew them inside the museum in the first place. We all talk about the power of objects, but rarely can a visitor directly engage with them at a museum.

**Do not buy artifakes or make replicas. Use the real thing!**

Cultural heritage institutions buy replicas for exhibitions, teaching collections, travel trunks, and exhibits at historic properties. Why not use the real thing and let it wear down from human use? Most collected objects enjoy a longer life expectancy than their unsaved counterparts. One place to find those objects could be through regional or topical coalitions.
Create regional or topical coalitions for sharing collections.

Collection-sharing efforts have failed in the past, but it is time to explore the opportunities afforded by forming coalitions. These relationships can help avoid repetition in regional collecting institutions while helping to fill in gaps for neighboring institutions. And this is a good way to make use of repetition in a collection by making objects available for hands-on experiences.

Partner with other arts organizations to use collections in new ways.

Most institutions loan objects, but imagine if museums partnered with theater production companies, like Punchdrunk, to incorporate museum objects into sets like the popular musical Sleep No More.

The set for this untraditional telling of Macbeth is filled with historical objects that the production crew acquired from antique stores, junk dealers, and flea markets. Everything was touchable. How could a museum become involved and also enrich that experience?

Collect traces online.

When there is no space to physically collect the histories of your communities consider creating a place online. Digital public history projects like the Bracero History Archive and History Harvests schedule community scanning and collecting days when students, librarians, and curators work together to digitize personal objects that come from personal collections. Objects are photographed, paper is scanned, and immediately made available online.

By thinking outside of existing collection policies and practices, we can prevent collections from being fixed in time, or fixed on representing the lives or whims of
collectors or property owners whose stories and interests are told through our nation’s cultural heritage.

We can make some space to collect new histories of the communities that our museums serve every day. But we must ask difficult questions about existing collections policies and consider letting some objects decay; some to be sold; and others to be donated. Simultaneously, we can engage visitors in true hands-on learning experiences while also making better use of the capacity of the internet by opening the virtual doors to storage areas.

**Notes:**


**Editor's Note:** This post is a web companion to the summer 2014 issue of *Forum Journal*: Stepping into the Future at Historic Sites.

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