

# A Case for Digital Collections



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Visitors to a “modern museum” in the late 19th and early 20th century found large glass cases filled with objects that encouraged them to look. According to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, museums were considered educational places, because objects held inherent meaning and spoke through the art of curation. Curators carefully selected objects and appropriate cases to communicate meaning through arrangement, order, and appearance.<sup>1</sup> Objects came from a museum’s eclectic collections that were the products of wealthy collectors’ personal tastes or evidence of empire building and conquest of nature, peoples, and places.

Learning from things and making emotional connections with objects continues today inside museums and throughout popular culture. David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig found in *The Presence of the Past* that many Americans trust the history they encounter in museums, and especially enjoy the opportunity to interpret objects on their own terms—even when many history museums mediate those experiences through exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> On American reality television shows, such as *American Pickers*, *Pawn Stars*, and *Antiques Roadshow*, objects found in barns, closets, and attics outshine the costars. Each object means one thing to its owner, and something different to its prospective buyer. Even antique shop owners who rely on the consumer capitalist side of object collecting, talk openly about emotional connections to objects as a means for attracting customers, claiming, “You can feel the history in most items in the shop.”<sup>3</sup> This intensely personal experience can also overshadow the power of these everyday objects to communicate multiple meanings.

The meaning of an object is never fixed or static. Once placed into a history museum or a personal collection, meaning is shaped by curators and visitors over time. Without interpreters, objects are silent. Scholars Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims remind us that things “are not eloquent as some thinkers in art museum claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they speak, they lie.”<sup>4</sup>

Many history museums no longer allow objects to speak for themselves in cases, without some contextual framing. Most exhibitions are thematic in design, driven by ideas and stories. Context and narrative support the interpretation of the objects. Still, an exhibit narrative speaks as if with one voice, even when it



**Figure 1.** Photographic Collage depicting the standard exhibit cases with specimens and artifacts used by the United States National Museum, now the Arts and Industries Building, c. 1880s. (Smithsonian Institution Archives), available at [http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_sic\\_9975](http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_9975).

carefully integrates the multiple perspectives of its creators and historical actors.<sup>5</sup> Representing disagreement and differences in interpretation is difficult in the physically constrained space of an exhibition gallery.

Digital environments can offer an unconstrained space for objects to project and for users to interpret their multiple meanings, but these environments are rarely designed for online experiences. Even as the cultural heritage sector is encouraged to invite participation from their audiences in meaning-making experiences, this is rarely found in online history museum spaces.<sup>6</sup> History museums are slowly sharing their collections online, occasionally asking for community contributions, and rarely inviting and presenting multiple interpretations of objects and narratives online.

In general, history museums are not creating transformative experiences about the past and present through online projects geared to their core audiences. A study in 2011 found only 17% of history museums published their collections online, and 11% developed online exhibitions or narratives.<sup>7</sup> Digitizing and publishing collections begin the process; they are building blocks, not end points.

Publishing collections means making them as accessible as possible for reaching different audiences in three important ways:

- visually through “generous interfaces” that do not require a user to come to the site with a specific question that they enter into a search bar, but rather offer a sampling of collection images that encourage exploration, such as *The Real Faces of White Australia*, (<http://invisibleaustralians.org/faces/>)<sup>8</sup>;
- programmatically to invite interrogation and use through digital methodologies, such as collection data from the British Museum (<http://collection.britishmuseum.org/>) or simple outputs from the Penn Museum (<http://www.penn.museum/collections/data.php>);
- freely with open licenses to promote transformative use by researchers and enthusiasts, such as the New York Public Library’s release and encouragement of use and re-use of public domain collections, (<http://www.nypl.org/research/collections/digital-collections/public-domain>).
- When using their digitized collections vigorously, museums have an opportunity to model historical practice by showing there is not one neat, carefully composed narrative of our pasts.

Digitized material culture collections are especially important to assist researchers in discovering perspectives of the past often missing in the written record alone. For example, George Washington’s Mount Vernon’s Midden Project, (<http://mountvernonmidden.org/>), digitized objects found in an archaeological site provide material evidence of the lives of the enslaved families owned by the Washington and Custis families. George and Martha left diaries and correspondence in their own words, but most of their slaves did not. Online material culture collections most often serve researchers seeking information about specific objects or answer specific questions. The Midden Project allows users to search, and also to browse visually by images to discover the scope of the collection. It is hard to let these objects speak for themselves. At a minimum, museums provide basic descriptions for collection objects. Descriptions for objects found in the Midden are longer than for other objects in Mount Vernon’s digital collections, because these have particular histories of their making, use, and ownership.

Museums, libraries, and archives use online platforms to enhance digital collections with assistance from their publics in crowdsourcing efforts to describe,

transcribe, tag, or identify. User-contributed comments and tags added to enhance interpretation are visible on the Flickr Commons, for example, but not on an institution's own website. Rarely are online users asked to correct or add more information directly in an online collection like the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum does on each item's page.<sup>9</sup> More recently, digital volunteers for the Smithsonian Institution assist with transcribing digitized objects and reviewing transcriptions in a separate transcription space. Volunteers contribute their time and specialized knowledge to help with the gargantuan task of metadata creation.<sup>10</sup>

Only a handful of history museums invite their audiences in for meaning-making activities in an online environment. Ford's Theatre asked individuals and historical organizations from across the country to digitize materials they owned related to Lincoln's assassination in 1865. Ford's then made those objects part of the digital collections connected to an exhibition and public programs commemorating the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's death.<sup>11</sup> The exhibition team at Smithsonian National Museum of American History planned parts of the newly opened "American Enterprise" exhibition in public by sharing ideas, objects, themes, and designs on a project blog and in Flickr. They also asked for personal histories related to agricultural heritage through an online collecting site.<sup>12</sup> And, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) asked for help in researching and writing biographies of children living in the Jewish ghetto in Lodz Poland, many of whom did not survive the Holocaust. Museum educators facilitated the co-creation of content with high school and undergraduate students online and published their work on the museum's website.<sup>13</sup> These museums offer good examples of how collaborative practice can happen online between staff and their publics.

Once collections are digitized and described, museums could create layered object descriptions and incorporate those objects in online exhibitions or digital stories. Online digital environments offer history museums the opportunity to layer content and contextualize objects through careful Web design in ways that do not overwhelm visitors.<sup>14</sup> For example, an individual object page might contain multiple descriptions that visually appear as brightly colored tabs or layers, with each tab representing a different interpretation. An exhibition about a community during World War II might contain multiple stories that make use of the same digital collections, allowing for many layers of interpretation to exist within the same digital space.

In the early days of Web, before online collections proliferated, a few history institutions invested in content-rich online exhibition sites that offered narrative experiences. Exhibition sites, such as *Lewis and Clark*, *National Bicentennial*, and *America on the Move* designed multiple pathways for users to explore content by reading narrative stories, following interactive maps, or browsing object collections. The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association and Memorial Hall Museum created *The Raid on Deerfield, the Many Stories of 1704*. The online exhibition experimented with making different voices available within the same digital

space by sharing five cultural perspectives and interpretations of the events near Deerfield, MA, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries [English, French, Kanienkehaka (Mohawk), Wendat (Huron) and Wóbanak]. The project invited users to explore by story theme, objects, maps, songs, and events. For each segment of the digital story, five different voices were visible, reminding users to look for and listen to more than one perspective for the events presented.<sup>15</sup> This type of online exhibition that eschews a master narrative in favor of offering multiple interpretations is a rare find in museums today.

Some history museums do tackle the murkiness of history and enthusiastically participate with their publics in digital environments, but do so inside the museum's spaces. The Tenement Museum, for example, developed the "Shop Life" guided tour that invites participants to puzzle through objects and documents representing lives of individuals living and working in the Lower East Side of New York at a particular era using an on-site touch table and interactive wall. Led by a museum educator, each visitor creates their own story from the collections and evidence available. Within the room, different interpretations emerge about the families represented and their relationship to major events in the city and national movements. Similar examples of digital storytelling online tend to be designed by museums for younger audiences. Game-like interfaces introduce how historical actors experience the past differently, and make visible to students that historical research does not result in one neat or definitive narrative of past events.<sup>16</sup>

Publicly funded history institutions, in particular, worry about the risks involved in engaging in difficult conversations about the past in public online environments that allow for many perspectives to be visible. History museums can be places where history and memory collide, creating feelings of distortion when a visitor is confronted with ideas and experiences that are not familiar or conflict with their beliefs.<sup>17</sup> These collisions can become controversial for history institutions. Carefully navigating those conflicts is challenging for all museums and public historians. Those uncomfortable spaces, however, are where understanding, learning, and empathy occur. Without any context or prompts to see something beyond the personal in an online experience, there may be no collisions. This might feel safer, but may not be helping history museums accomplish their educational missions to communicate the complexities of the histories the museums are designed to share.

We are still waiting to see if these conversations can effectively occur online in a more visible and permanent way. Incorporating guiding principles from visitor studies and user experience design can help museums and their online communities find points of connection between the "collective memories" and "personal contexts" everyone brings to a museum's online presence.<sup>18</sup> Museum staff and public historians face challenges in carefully balancing a desire to invite public participation in history-making activities with the work required to meet audiences where they are, while also modeling good historical thinking practices in online spaces.

Some history museums will not want to engage directly in those moments of distortion, but wish for their collections to be integrated in different forms of research or storytelling. In those cases, sharing collections freely provide building blocks for other to build digital public history projects. This practice benefits institutions and historians that do not have collections of their own, such as the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, that relies almost exclusively on public domain and Creative Commons digital sources available from museums, libraries, and archives for building public history projects like *Histories of the National Mall* (<http://mallhistory.org>). While *Histories* intentionally links collection items back to its home institution, there is no standard practice for how institutions can link back to [mallhistory.org](http://mallhistory.org). Increased availability and use of museum collections online has not, in turn, also opened a pathway for cultural heritage institutions to collect and showcase content created outside of the institution. This type of exchange can occur through social media platforms that link museum assets with content created elsewhere on the Web. History museums could more openly ask individuals and institutions using their digital collections for interpretative work to share creations with the institution, much like they might ask for a copy of a book or article published using assets from the physical holdings. The technologies exist to enable collaborative content creation and scholarly exchange from different museum audiences, but the challenges often lie within institutions that focus on, and sometimes silo, their holdings.

Increasingly, we see that museums of all types are rethinking their strategic plans and making digital initiatives integral parts of a museum's mission. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa offers an ambitious example to develop principles that guide all areas of the museum's work by crafting a powerful digital aspiration: "We will actively enrich peoples' lives by making Te Papa's unique collections, content, stories and experiences accessible to them—where, when, and how they want." (<https://github.com/te-papa/digital-principles/blob/master/digital-principles.md>). This set of principles includes enabling digital experiences that give visitors opportunities to contribute and collaborate with the museum.<sup>19</sup> Responsibility for collaboration and interaction with the Te Papa's visitors becomes everyone's responsibility, in every department. All history museums can create digital spaces for facilitating connections to the past that invite visitors to contemplate and validate their personal histories and memories, while also encouraging empathy and understanding across their communities of uncomfortable histories.

By only publishing collections online without offering better ways to connect these collections to the many stories they can tell, museums are in danger of replicating the exhibit cases of the 19th century. Browsing through collection images online invites a user to look at the aesthetic of the object as if in a case. The only story told is the one imagined by the individual if there is no scaffold framing objects within a complex world where it was made, bought, sold, used, and re-used. History museums can use online digital spaces more intentionally to

highlight multiple perspectives through stories or narratives, and accommodate multiple layers of context that enrich understanding of our pasts and presents.

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## Notes

1. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.
2. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998).
3. "Scarlet Sales Antiques: Scarlet Sales," Downtown Franklin Tennessee, <http://downtown-franklintn.com/listings/scarlett-scales-scarlett-scales-antiques>.
4. Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 159–175.
5. *Ibid.*, 166–8, 173–74.
6. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>.
7. In 2011, I reviewed a sampling of 115 websites out of the 1179 self-identified history museums listed in the American Association of Museums online membership directory. The American Association of Museums is now known as the American Alliance of Museums. Their membership directory is searchable and filterable by museum categories, <http://www.aam-us.org/about-museums/find-a-museum>. I counted down 10 to select my next for review. All of the data collected for the State of History Museum, 2011, is available, <http://bit.ly/stateofhistory-museumweb>. In 2004, I reviewed 85 museums available from a list of international museums compiled by Museums Canada that is no longer available. I looked at every fifth entry. The data is available here, <https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1q57JY9CBmYg9esl7rSJ-KJWnaqwzL7iFWZWQeiMn9EPU>.
8. Mitchell Whitelaw, "Generous Interfaces for Digital Cultural Collections," *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 9, no. 1, (2015): <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/1/000205/000205.html>.
9. Each object in the Cooper Hewitt's collection contains boilerplate language asking for more information about an object, "If you would like to tell us more about an object or have found an error in an object record, please let us know!" Users are sent an online form where they can add more information. See Flickr Commons (<https://www.flickr.com/commons>).

10. History institutions are engaging digital volunteers through community-sourced transcription projects. A few examples include the Smithsonian Institution Transcription Center, <https://transcription.si.edu/> the New York Public Library's What's on the Menu? Project, <http://menus.npl.org/>; and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, Papers of the War Department, <http://wardepartmentpapers.org>. The Smithsonian's National Postal Museum invited docents and volunteer philatelic experts in the mid-00s to research and write descriptions together with their curators and historians for their online collections catalog, *Arago*, <http://arago.si.edu/>.
11. Ford's Theater, *Remembering Lincoln*, <http://rememberinglincoln.fords.org/>.
12. The planning stages of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History *American Enterprise* exhibition have been taken down, but their collecting site remains as the Agricultural Innovation and Heritage Archive, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/agheritage>.
13. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Children of the Lodz Ghetto*, <http://www.ushmm.org/online/lodzchildren/> and their newest effort *History Unfolded: US Newspapers and the Holocaust*, <https://newspapers.ushmm.org/about/project>.
14. Amelia Wong, "The Whole Story, and Then Some: 'Digital Storytelling' in Evolving Museum Practice," *MW2015: Museums and the Web 2015* (January 31, 2015), <http://mw2015.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/the-whole-story-and-then-some-digital-story-telling-in-evolving-museum-practice/>.
15. *Lewis and Clark, National Bicentennial*, <http://www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org/>; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History and Second Story, *America on the Move*, <http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>; Mint Museum of Art and Interactive Knowledge, Inc., *MesoAmerican Ballgame*, <http://interactiveknowledge.com/ballgame/main.php>; Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, and Digital Gizmo, *The Raid on Deerfield, the Many Stories of 1704*, <http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/>.
16. The Tenement Museum developed a game of the lived experiences of immigrants, <https://www.tenement.org/immigrate/>. Plimoth Plantation's *You are the Historian* explores the myths and evidence surrounding the first Thanksgiving, <https://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/thanksgiving-interactive-you-are-historian>.
17. Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 44–63.
18. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Altamira Press, 2000); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). A good starting point for reading more on user experience design is *A List Apart*, <http://alistapart.com/topic/user-experience>.
19. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's "Digital Principles" document lives on GitHub to allow for versioning and revising, <https://github.com/te-papa/digital-principles>. Also see: Wendy Pryor, "Digital Strategy in Evolution: Issues and Responses Emerging from the Project to Develop a Digital Transformation Strategy for Museum Victoria." *MW2016: Museums and the Web 2016* (January 24, 2016), <http://mw2016.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/digital-strategy-in-evolution-issues-and-responses-emerging-from-the-project-to-develop-a-digital-transformation-strategy-for-museum-victoria/>.

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