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# Working Towards More Inclusive History Museum Exhibits: How Can History Museums Better Incorporate The Female Narrative Into Their Exhibits

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WORKING TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE HISTORY MUSEUM EXHIBITS: HOW  
CAN HISTORY MUSEUMS BETTER INCORPORATE THE FEMALE NARRATIVE  
INTO THEIR EXHIBITS

A thesis submitted to the  
Department of Education at Belmont University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Non Profit Leadership

By

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BS, University of Illinois, 2016


Belmont University

April 2020


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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how history museums can better incorporate the female narrative into their exhibits. Women's stories play an integral role in history and are an important element of authentically and accurately portraying the events of the past. For museums, that is the ultimate objective. As institutions of learning and preservation, museums are empowered with the responsibility to present information with integrity and accuracy. That includes presenting all perspectives in a holistic view. Museums are a significant source of knowledge and information, especially for school children. The images and messages that are portrayed have an impact on how students view history and the world. This is a very powerful position to be in and it is the duty of museum professionals to ensure that what is being conveyed through exhibits is the appropriate message. In order to achieve this, intentional and targeted actions need to be taken. This study aims to understand current museum practices and build a foundation for how inclusiveness within history exhibits is being handled today. Reviewing the exhibit development process provides insight into the system that is creating exhibit content. With this initial knowledge, changes can be developed and implemented that address the issue at the source, creating systemic and long-lasting change.

*Keywords:* women, female narrative, diverse perspective, museums, exhibit development, diversity and inclusion.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	vii
Chapter 1 .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	1
Purpose of Study .....	2
Significance of the Study .....	2
Thesis concept with methods and procedures.....	4
Definitions.....	5
Chapter 2.....	6
Review of Literature .....	6
Introduction.....	6
Power of Interpretation .....	9
Interpretation Challenges .....	12
Learning from Related Fields .....	14
Science Centers and EDGE design.....	14
History Textbooks.....	15
Review of Literature Conclusion .....	16
Staff Diversity .....	16
Collections, Images and Interpretation .....	16
Learning from Related Fields and Incorporating Technology.....	17
Chapter Three.....	19
Methods.....	19
Introduction.....	19

Data Collection Method.....	19
Qualitative.....	19
Participant selection.....	20
Procedure.....	23
Methods of Data Analysis.....	23
Qualitative Data.....	23
Mapping of qualitative data.....	24
Limitations of the Study.....	26
Assumptions of the Study.....	26
Chapter 4.....	28
Data Analysis Results.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Data: Interview Questions.....	28
Conclusions.....	34
Chapter 5.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Research Implications and Recommendations.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Objectives.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Summary.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Implications.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Recommendations.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
References.....	46
Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	51
Appendix B: Interview Summary.....	52

Appendix C: Interview Summary .....	55
Appendix D: Interview Summary .....	58
Appendix E: Interview Summary .....	62
Appendix F: Interview Summary.....	63
Appendix G: Interview Summary .....	65

List of Figures

Figure 1. Design Thinking Process diagram, Author/Copyright holder: Teo Yu Siang and Interaction Design Foundation. ....24



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **Statement of Problem**

Historically there have been many groups that have been misrepresented or underrepresented within museums. A 2019 study conducted by the Public Library of Science found only 12.6% of art in the sampled American art museums was created by women and 85% of the artists represented were white. From a lack of representation of minority artists in galleries to exhibit images that depict women exclusively in domestic roles, there is much work to be done before museums accurately reflect the dynamic and diverse history of society and the human race.

For example, military history presents a particularly unique challenge for creating a diverse and inclusive narrative. The military remained segregated until executive order 9981 was signed by President Truman on July 26, 1948 ([militaryhistory.org](http://militaryhistory.org)) and women were not fully integrated into all military positions until March 10, 2016 (State News Service, 2017). The result of these facts is that the major players in the “traditional,” combat focused, military narrative are white males. As museums work to expand this narrative and tell the stories of those who were previously not included in the story of the military, they face the challenge of a lack of artifacts, documentation, and firsthand accounts from these minority groups. Museums need to find ways to reframe the traditional narrative to expand the stories they tell within the constraints they are operating under.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand current practices of museum exhibit development and identify the most effective methods for holistically representing the female perspective within an exhibit context. This research also includes an investigation of exhibit assessment tools and aims to determine how to best evaluate the success of the various exhibit design techniques in creating a stronger, more accurate representation of the female narrative.

### **Significance of the Study**

The museum industry is a very large part of the United States economy and culture. It supports approximately 726,000 jobs (Oxford, 2017) and in 2018, museums and historical sites in the US generated more than \$13 billion in revenue (S.Locke, 2018). They also serve a large audience and have direct contact with millions of visitors every year. In 2018, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the most visited museum in the United States that year, received 6.95 million visitors (S.Locke, 2019). That same year, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History alone had 4.1 million visitors (S.Locke, 2019).

As museums look to make changes to their displays and reinterpret their collections and narratives, visitors and the visitor experience must be kept at the center of all decisions. In today's busy world, people have more options than ever before for how to spend their free time and disposable income. Museums must compete with the movies, kids' sport activities, sporting events, concerts, etc. In order to stay relevant and grow their visitorship, museums need to provide their visitors with an engaging, immersive, experience that goes beyond artifacts and content labels.

“Cultural consumers are increasingly driven by the need for authenticity, for an immersive experience, for connection. Good museums have a crucial role to play in the visitor and cultural economy of a place” (Future of the civic museum, page 6).

In 2010 only 9% of the core museum visiting audience was a minority (non-white) (Center for the Future of Museums, 2010), while 34% of the population of the United States report themselves as a minority (Center for the Future of Museums, 2010). The minority population of the U.S. has significantly increased over the last couple decades (20% in 1985) and is projected to continue to grow with current estimates expecting the U.S. population to be 46% minority by 2035 (Center for the Future of Museums, 2010). Visitors want to be able to connect with the stories they are reading about on the walls of a museum and see themselves and their communities accurately represented within the displays. As the demographics of the United States continue to shift, and visitors’ expectations and demands for authenticity grow, museums are going to need to adapt and respond to those they are serving.

Beyond serving as an “experience” for visitors, museums play a critical role in preserving and shaping our culture. They are often viewed as an authority on “what is important” and have a significant impact on our perception of the world, our communities, and historical events. With this influence, museums have a responsibility to carefully consider and craft the messages they convey through their exhibits, programming, and other published material. This message is especially important for middle and high school students who visit museums. When university philosophy students were surveyed about the importance of students visiting museums, their feedback supported this belief. Students were asked to rank the importance of students visiting museums on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being very important. “When the total results were calculated, they showed that 55% of students decided for ranks 4 and 5 which tell us that the

students have a developed awareness about the importance of visiting museums. If you add to this 32% of students who opted for rank 3, which represents a moderate importance of learning at the museums, then we can certainly say that students think that this kind of learning is efficient, and therefore necessary in the education of children” (Brajcic, Kovacevic, & Kuscevic, 2013, page 168). This demonstrates the impact that museums have and how powerful they are as an informal learning environment. Students are the future and how history is presented to them determines how those stories are being carried on to the next generation.

This power is why it is important to understand what message is being presented by museum exhibits and work to shape that message to be inclusive and empowering to all those who visit. This is a complicated task with no immediate or simple solution. As museum staff continue to increase their focus on this issue and incorporate new techniques and strategies into their exhibits, they will need guidelines and assessment tools to understand the impact of the changes they are implementing. Establishing industry standards and benchmarks for diverse representation encourages all museums to strive to achieve those standards and brings focus to the importance of what stories are being told and how they are shared.

### **Thesis concept with methods and procedures**

This research will utilize qualitative data to gain an understanding of current museum practices. Qualitative data was gathered via interviews with museum professionals, specifically curators and exhibit designers who are directly involved with the exhibit development process. These conversations were used to understand current museum practices and how, if at all, gender representation is included in exhibit development conversations and processes.

Interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions focused on how artifacts to be displayed are selected, how diversity and gender are incorporated into exhibit design discussions, and what are the greatest interpretive challenges facing their respective organizations.

After conducting these interviews, the notes and audio recordings were reviewed to identify key phrases and themes within and across the interviews. The common ideas from the interviews were then used to establish a baseline understanding of current museum standards and what the field considers “best practices”.

### **Operational Definition of terms**

- **Maintenance Activities:** A set of practices that involve the sustenance, welfare and effective reproduction of all the members of a social group
- **American Alliance of Museums (AAM):** Is a member organization of museums whose mission is to champion museums and nurture excellence in partnership with our members and allies (AAM-US.org)
- **Informal Learning Environment:** Forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate but are not institutionalized. They are less organized and structured than either formal or non-formal education. (UNESCO.org, 2011)
- **Androcentric:** centered on, emphasizing, or dominated by males or masculine interests (dictionary.com)

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature **Introduction**

Existing material regarding museum exhibition development and gender representation within museums leaves gaps at the intersection of various commonly addressed topics. While female artist representation within museums is well documented (Reilly, 2015; Topaz et al, 2019; Shaw, 2019), similar work within history museums has not been as well studied. There is research that has been conducted around female representation within history textbooks (Williams & Bennett, 2016), yet this research does not expand to include museum exhibits. Understanding the impact and effectiveness of existing techniques for presenting the female narrative allows us to begin to experiment with applying these methodologies to the specific context of history museum exhibits.

The first step in better representing those you serve is ensuring that there is diversity amongst those directly involved in the exhibit development process. Diverse and inclusive exhibits start with a diverse board and staff and inclusive work environment.

“..Addressing issues of power and unequal access within the workplace is critical. A diverse board and staff is a logical output of becoming more accessible, inclusive, and equitable” (AAM, page 10, 2018).

Fair and authentic representation begins at the top and will then naturally become incorporated into all the material a museum creates. A recent study by the American Alliance of Museums did show some positive signs, reporting that 45% of board members were female and 62% of the organizations’ included in the study had female executive directors (Boardsource, 2017). Having women in senior leadership positions is a positive start. Executive directors have strong influence on major, strategic decisions that can shift policies and practices at an institutional level,

resulting in real, long lasting change. Even with so many female executive directors, women are still greatly under-represented among senior leadership roles at the largest museums. According to a study by the Association for Art Museum Directors (2016), percentage of female directors has an inverse relationship with museum budget. None of the four museums with a budget of \$100+ million had female directors, and only 11% of museums with a budget of \$45-\$100 million had female directors.

Data does suggest that museum directors are ready and more likely to take action towards stronger diversity and inclusion versus their board chair counterparts. Based on surveys provided to board members, chairs, and museum directors, directors were much less satisfied with current diversity and inclusion efforts than board chairs (BoardSource, 2017). Women are a minority in many areas and understand what it feels like to be the only one that looks like them in a room or a meeting. Women live diversity every day, so it stands to reason that a group of professionals that is majority female, such as the surveyed museum directors, would be more unhappy with the current status of diversity and inclusion efforts than a group of men, such as the surveyed museum board chairs.

Some of the demographic data was not as encouraging. In a Boardsource study, 62% of board chairs were male and 46% of boards studied were 100% white (BoardSource, 2017). This study shows that there is still a significant lack of female representation at the senior most position of museums and an even more significant gap when considering race. Women not only need to be on staff in museums but in positions of power that have influence and make decisions. This is not only a manner of equity, but is in the best interest of museums.

“As leadership teams recognize the need to adapt their organizations to society’s changing needs, this includes examining who is sitting around the boardroom table,

which is where critical decisions are made. Various backgrounds and experiences (professional and personal, as well as cultural and ethnic) add to the quality of the board. A board is often expected to “represent” the organization’s community as a way to create accountability and form a link with the public” (Boardsource, 2016, pg 9).

Executive directors are hired by and report to the board, which is led by the board chair.

Without diversity at the top, it is much more difficult for it to trickle down within the organization.

“Research suggests that lack of diversity in board composition may be a network problem. Ninety-one percent (91%) of white Americans’ social networks are other white Americans, which is the racial group that dominates nonprofit board and chief executive positions.<sup>5</sup> Board members tend to be older and from wealthier populations, and their social networks also tend to be majority white.<sup>6</sup> These factors both explain and perpetuate the problem of board diversity” ( Boardsource, 2016, pg 9).

According to a report by Reach Advisors sited on the AAM website, “Museums are considered the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, nonprofits researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers”. This power places a lot of responsibility on museums to be extremely conscientious of the messages they are conveying through their work. Every piece of material produced by a museum sends a message and perpetuates information that is held in the highest regard of accuracy and truth. Developing an authentic narrative is a complex task and museum professionals face many challenges as they work to create exhibits that represent all perspectives in an accurate and holistic manner. To address these challenges, current interpretive techniques must be studied to understand how they



are impacting the essence of the narrative being portrayed within an exhibit and what can be done to make this narrative more inclusive, specifically of the female experience.

### **Power of Interpretation**

A history museum's exhibits, programming, published material, etc. all center around the museum's collection and mission. Artifacts are the common thread that holds an exhibit together and gives the narrative a direction. What objects are on display and the way they are displayed greatly impact the perception of the object and those connected to that object. In her article about gender perspective within archeology museums, Torreira (2016) demonstrates the impact artifacts and interpretive content can have on devaluing the female experience.

“Not only are spaces dedicated to women in archaeological museums usually limited to domestic settings, but in addition these essential tasks relating to the care and sustenance of the group... are not looked on as being of any importance” (Torreira, 2016, page 19).

History museums are entrusted with the task of preserving the past and telling the stories that built the societies and communities of today. The events that are shared and the individuals who are highlighted are what society will remember. Museums shape the collective memory and create a lens for viewing the actions of the past. Exhibit design and content creation decisions need to be educated and intentional to ensure women receive their rightful place within that story.

In her article, Torreira suggests that museums “... display objects that are traditionally relegated to the museum warehouse, such as cooking pots and other utensils used in transforming and preparing food, textiles, and basketry, that can tell us so much about the identity build-up by a people or a segment of that population, such as its women ” (Torreira, 2016, page 22).

Women's contributions and achievements have historically been undervalued and gone untold, largely due to the systemic gender inequality that has plagued communities for centuries. In his speech announcing the launching of a Smithsonian Women's History Museum Initiative, Smithsonian Secretary David J. Skorton stated that women's achievements have been "underrated, undervalued, and in some cases completely unrecognized" (McGlone, 2018, [washingtontopost.com](http://washingtontopost.com)). If museums do not work to actively combat this bias, they can end up contributing to the cycle.

As Torriera goes on to state in her article, "...In the majority of museums analyzed, we find that the archaeological heritage exhibited is linked almost exclusively to the discourse of men, disseminating a clearly biased vision of the past. This is how museums in general have embraced traditional patriarchal principles, by assuming that the greater part of material culture has been produced by men. From this fact, museum visitors are led to deduce the superiority of men over women, and to the belief that men are the protagonists of history" (Torriera, 2016, page 19).

Though it may look different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to this day, women are fighting the battle for equality and continue to break down barriers for future generations. As history museums begin to curate these current events in an environment where news and online content is more accessible than ever, the public is holding them to a higher standard than before. The recent controversy with The National Archives perfectly exemplifies this. On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the National Archives issued an apology for altering a photo that was being used as a graphic within a promotional display in the Archive's elevator lobby (Archive's Press release, 2020). This apology came after great pressure from the public and professional historians, curators, and archivists in response to a Washington Post article that broke that story. The photo was of the

January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017 women's march and was promoting the Archive's current exhibit commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. The modifications consisted of blurring out some of the words on the protesters' posters that were criticizing President Trump and referring to female anatomy (Washington Post, Jan 17, 2020). Within four days of the apology the Archives replaced the photo with the original, non-distorted version (Post, Jan 23, 2020). This incident demonstrates the power that a history museum can have on the presentation of historic events and how the expectation from the public is that the presentation is truthful, authentic, and unaltered. This is the level of transparency that the public must demand from museums.

Gender representation goes beyond simply including a photo from the women's march or a nurse's outfit in an exhibit about War World I. It is about how "the contextualizations of museum materialism and gendered power relations make man a central figure in the stories told through exhibitions and displays, pushing women (as a binary category of gender) to the less discernable outer rims" (Bergsdóttir, 2016, page 128). Museum professionals need to look outside their exhibit halls and take steps to address the systemic challenges that are impacting diversity and inclusion within the museum field. In a 2018 report on diversity and inclusion, the AAM outlines some big picture questions that they encourage museum leadership to take time to think about.

"Museum boards, directors, and staff should ask the following questions across functions and areas of practice: Does the museum have an institution-wide diversity plan? How do collections, exhibitions, and research reflect marginalized communities? Who does the museum partner with? Does the museum partner with vendors who are members of

underrepresented groups? How do we reach those who aren't supportive of equity?"  
(AAM, 2018, page 10)

By asking these questions and taking the time to reflect, museums can begin to identify their specific challenges and develop action plans to address the areas they would like to make changes in. This is the first step towards improving representation within museum exhibits and initiating real transformation in the museum space.

### **Interpretation Challenges**

As history museums are looking to become more inclusive and tell the stories of those who have historically been under-represented, a lack of documentation and artifacts can create a major obstacle. These stories are buried and take time to research and discover. Without strong primary sources and records, it becomes much more difficult to build a story and feel confident in the accuracy of the statements that are being made. To authentically convey an individual's experience, it is useful to have their own words and first-hand accounts to build off.

In the situations where there is a lack of supporting evidence, messaging must be handled with extreme delicacy. It is imperative that museum professionals avoid using biases and assumptions to fill in the gaps in the historical record as they create their interpretations and develop exhibit material. Torreira specifically discusses this issue within archeology museums. "A(nother) frequent issue is the division of tasks according to gender, which in the majority of cases is based on stereotypes lacking any scientific grounds. For example, we cannot attribute Paleolithic artifacts to men or women, children or the elderly. Any interpretations, in principle, should be based on ethnographic analogy, although in most cases a traditional biased interpretation predominates" (Torreira, 2016, page 23).

This traditional biased interpretation often gives preference to the “power-wielding groups” (Torreira, 2016, page 22), which customarily have been men. In her article, Rubio (2012) discusses how historically “maintenance activities”, believed to have historically been conducted by women, receive less attention.

“Although the archaeological record normally offers abundant data related to these [maintenance] activities, they have not been fully studied. As many authors have noticed (Brumfiel 1992, Conkey and Spector 1984), those tasks that are thought to be feminine have not received so much attention” (Rubio, 2012, page 31).

Museums must overcome this tendency by implementing and enforcing processes and procedures that encourage open dialogue and review of museum content amongst staff. These assessments must be guided to focus on checking for biases and assumptions.

One only need to look at female representation amongst public outdoor statues to understand the lack of physical objects available to assist in constructing the female narrative. According to a 2017 review by CNN of the Smithsonian online inventories catalog, of the 5,575 outdoor sculpture portraits of historical figures in the United States, 559 portray women, a mere 10% of all statues. The National Park Service lists 152 monuments in the United States, only three of which (less than 2%) are dedicated to historic female figures. None of the 30 national monuments managed by the park service honor women (Peled, 2017). This physical lack of representation keeps these stories hidden and out of the public conversation. Progress is being made. In August 2016, Nashville unveiled the Tennessee Women Suffrage Monument, depicting 5 suffrage icons who played pivotal roles in the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment (Marchetti, 2016). Thanks to the organization Monumental Women, Central Park is scheduled to be unveiling its first statue of a real women in August 2020 (Quaglia, 2019).

### **Learning from Related Fields**

History museums have a great opportunity to learn from other institutions and related research to understand the impact their message has and how to best frame the female perspective. Both science centers and history textbooks face similar challenges and research has been conducted to assist in developing and assessing techniques to combat this struggle. Work by Dancstep (née Dancu) and Sindorf, in 2016 and 2018 investigated the relationship between exhibit design and engagement of young girls at science centers. Williams and Bennett (2016) explored history textbooks and established criteria for assessing the visual depiction of women in the books. There is great untapped potential for history museums in finding an application for these learnings. History museums could also use similar strategies to target research within their own institutions.

### **Science Centers and EDGE design**

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has conducted studies around female engagement within science centers and identified strategies for increasing girls' interest in STEM topics. The result of these studies was a framework that outlines specific design attributes that targets girls and encourages them to participate in STEM related exhibit activities. These attributes are referred to as EDGE (exhibit designs for girl's engagement) design attributes (Dancstep (née Dancu) and Sindorf, 2018). Of the original 55 attributes that the study identified, nine were found to have a statistically significant impact on girls' engagement. These nine attributes fall into three different categories; exhibit labels((a)use drawings and ((b) images of people), exhibit look-and-feel ((a)homey/personal/homemade/delicate,(b)familiar objects, (c)playful/whimsical/humorous), and exhibit interactions ((a)multiple stations or sides,(b)space

to accommodate three or more people,(c)visitors can watch others to preview, (d)open ended) (Dancstep (née Dancu) and Sindorf, 2016).

Identifying the top nine EDGE design attributes is only the first step in understanding how girls engage with science exhibits. A follow-up study of the EDGE design attributes studied if girls' interactions and engagement with exhibits was enhanced by the presence of these attributes. Based on in-person observations and video recordings of girls interacting with exhibits, it was found that these attributes do have an impact on the girls' visitor experience. Girls had higher dwell time, displayed more enjoyment, and returned more often to exhibits that incorporated EDGE design attributes (Dancstep (née Dancu) and Sindorf, 2019).

This type of study not only provides insight into the female visitor experience, but builds a framework for applying a "gender lens" to a museum exhibit. The aforementioned methodologies and assessment techniques can be modified and customized for a history museum setting, allowing museum professionals to further their understanding of best practices for creating inclusive, authentic narratives.

### **History Textbooks**

Significant research has also been completed around the representation and inclusion of women in history textbooks. Through their analysis of the images within two unique history textbooks, Williams and Bennett identify three major themes that the images fall in to: 1) traditional 2) women's suffrage 3) reform (Williams & Bennett, 2016). The nature of these categories demonstrates how limited of a view textbooks provide into the role women have played within American history. Their stories are missing or written through a masculine lens, perpetuating the structure of a patriarchal society. "History is not a male affair, but this research

suggests textbooks continue to promote the view that women played only minor roles in United States history, with men the main players” (Williams & Bennett, 2016, pg 132).

Graphics and images are an important element of museum exhibits. Williams and Bennett’s work provide an outline for reviewing the visual components of history museums and how to best utilize that communication tool to present the desired story and message to the public.

### **Review of Literature Conclusion**

While the existing body of research is extremely valuable, there is a need for research that connects the existing scholarship to understand the requirements for exhibit design, content and programming within the context of history museums. It is important to understand the impact that female representation within history exhibit development can be used to create exhibits that present authentic stories.

### **Staff Diversity**

Addressing gender representation begins with board and staff diversity. With 62% of board members being male, and 46% of boards being 100% white, the demographics of museum leadership does not accurately reflect the communities they are serving (Boardsource, 2017). Those in power are making the decisions that directly influence what is displayed within exhibits. Without diverse leadership that is intentional with its focus on building inclusive museum experiences, there will never be any change.

### **Collections, Images and Interpretation**

Museums have a great sphere of influence and must yield their power with great caution and careful thought. They are the keepers and storytellers of our history and must take that responsibility seriously. Part of that responsibility is to present a full range of perspectives and



maintain an unbiased presentation of the facts. In her article, Torreira describes the power this type of representation can have.

“Including a gender perspective in the exposition of museum pieces allows us to dismantle deep-rooted clichés that are the result of an androcentric attitude toward history and research and, in many cases, have shaped Western ideology and culture” (Torreira, 2016, page 24).

One of a museum’s most valuable tools for incorporating gender perspective is its collection. Combined with objects, they shape the narrative of exhibits and direct where the visitors focus will be. A collection can also be a constraint for curators if there are gender or diversity gaps within their institution’s collection. Images and loans are great ways to fill gaps. Consider the controversy of the image that was modified by the National Archives. Images are an incredibly powerful narrative tool and present fantastic opportunities to engage with visitors and create a truly engaging and meaningful experience for them.

Though artifact and image selection is a critical step, the process of creating a gender perspective does not stop there. Focus and assessment must extend to the interpretation and contextualization of the objects. Simply posting a Rosie the Riveter with a WWII exhibit is not enough. How the object is presented and what information is shared about the object are key elements of building an inclusive narrative. Museums need to review their institution-wide diversity plan, assess who they partner with, and assess how their collections, exhibits, and research reflect marginalized communities (AAM, 2018).

### **Learning from Related Fields and Incorporating Technology**

Investigating EDGE decision revealed the importance of visitor engagement and providing visitors with the opportunity to interact with each other. As museums begin to

incorporate more technology and interactive activities into galleries, graphics are going to increase in prevalence and become a more prominent tool for communicating. Pallud (2017) discusses the positive impact of technology on visitor learning in his article.

“How do museum technologies enhance learning? In answer to this question, we can say that they need to be easy to use and to provide an interactive experience. These technological dimensions, in turn, will elicit emotional reactions such as a sense of immersion, curiosity, enjoyment, and authenticity that will, in turn, lead to a positive learning experience” (Pallud, 2017, pg 475).

Technology presents unlimited opportunity for creating narratives with flexibility for updating, condensing, etc. A lot of information can be store in a small device and the information can become customized for each visitor to enhance their experience.

## Chapter Three

### Methods

#### **Introduction**

The focus of this research is to understand the current practices of museum professionals as it relates to integrating diversity and inclusion into the exhibit development process, specifically in regards to the female narrative. The data gathered during this study is qualitative, collected through interviews with current museum professionals. The beginning of this chapter details how participants were selected, who the participants were, and the methodology for designing the questions that were included in the interview guide. This will be followed by a review of the qualitative data mapping process and an assessment of the limitations of the study.

#### **Data Collection Method**

##### **Qualitative**

Qualitative research is described by Kemparaj and Chavan as a “range of methodological approaches which aim to generate an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world” (2013, pubmed.gov). It empowers the researcher to connect with the participants and establish a first-hand understanding of the topic they are studying. “Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things” (Taylor, et al., 2015, page 18). Qualitative research reveals the information between the bars on a graph and the numbers in a chart and provides a deeper understanding of a subject.

Qualitative research was specifically selected for this study as it is the most effective method to answer the research question. Constructing museum content is a complex, multi-dimensional process that requires human-centric data to understand. Museum content is created to educate, and as we discuss developing a female narrative within exhibits, the essence of the conversation is about education. Understanding how individuals learn and what are the best

techniques for educating within an informal learning environment is very multifaceted. As David Anderson discusses in his article about visitor studies, “where the focus of research is to better understand the phenomenon of learning itself, a qualitative interpretivist framework may be best suited to elucidate the complex richness and depth of the phenomenon” (Anderson, 2009, pg 19). A semi-structured interview method was used to facilitate open dialogue with participants and fully capture their breath of knowledge and experience. It allowed for adaptability and flexibility as needed during interviews and during the research process.

### **Participant selection**

Participants were selected for their current positions in museums, expertise, and personal connection to the researcher and their network. Their diverse backgrounds and expertise provided a broad spectrum of perspectives. Men and women were interviewed to include views from both genders and the participants represented museums of various sizes and focuses, ensuring diversity at multiple levels.

Participant 1 received a BS in history and currently works at a medium size history museum in Chicago. She has extensive experience in the museum field, working in a wide range of positions across the industry. She spent time as a project manager in a Colorado museum before becoming a Director of Exhibitions. During her time in Chicago she has taught museum related seminars and courses at the Graham School of the University of Chicago.

Participant 2 has spent much of her career shaping how museums and historic sites tell the stories of the underrepresented. She recently became the executive director of a historical foundation on the East Coast, a position previously held by men. She was a director of interpretations at a large historic site and prior to her current position she was the CEO of a history museum in Virginia.

Participant 3 acquired a BS in history and MA in Public History and has worked for a broad range of museums and local historical societies before taking the position of exhibitions and collections technician at a medium size military history museum in the Chicago Metro area.

Participant 4 received a BS in studio art, photography from the University of the South and is currently working towards a Masters in Public History. She is currently the Director of Exhibitions for a mid-size history museum in Tennessee. Her experience with historical preservation and navigating the relationship between the community, government, and history organizations bring a unique perspective to this study.

Participant 5 is currently the Director of Innovation and STEAM for a National youth focused organization. Having a PhD in Philosophy, curriculum and instruction, she provided a unique perspective on the educational value of museums and the elements that create an effective informal learning environment.

Participant 6 has been the executive director of a small local history museum for the last 5 years and recently took the position of executive director for a larger local history museum. She holds a BA in Art History and a Master's in Museum Studies and has a great holistic perspective

Each participant was asked 9 pre-determined questions regarding the exhibit development process. These questions focused on processes and understanding the current practices that are followed within history museums as it relates to incorporating diverse perspectives into their exhibits. While the specific questions addressed the universal concept of diverse representation within exhibits, each interview was prefaced with background on the research focus and created context for the participant to focus their answers on the female narrative. While initial answers addressed broad concepts, participants were encouraged to provide examples and specifics that

related to the female narrative. The questions address all phases of the exhibit development process, from the physical space to post-opening assessments. The objective of the interviews was to gain an understanding of how museum professionals are addressing diversity and inclusion and what challenges they are facing in presenting the holistic narrative they are aiming for. The questions include:

1. Begin with verifying understanding of space (# of permanent galleries, temp spaces, theaters, etc.)
2. Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
3. How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
4. Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
5. Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
6. What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?
7. What are some ways you measure the public’s reaction to new content?
8. Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
9. What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is facing?

## **Procedure**

Initially 8 people were contacted via email to request interviews (*see Appendix A*). These 8 individuals were selected for their current positions in museums, expertise, and personal connection to the researcher and their network. Five of these people responded that they were willing to be interviewed and no response was received from the remaining three. In order to collect a robust enough set of data, a request was then posted on the National and Chicago Emerging Museum Professionals Facebook pages. One person responded to the post and was found to meet the criteria for being a participant. Interviewees were located in Chicago, Nashville, and Virginia.

In order to accommodate geographic locations and schedules, participants were offered in-person or over the phone options for conducting the interviews. Two of the interviews were able to be conducted in-person and four were conducted via phone.

Interviews lasted for 20-30 minutes and consisted of all 9 questions being asked in the order listed above. All in-person interviews and one phone interview were recorded for accuracy and documentation and then transcribed. During all interviews, detailed hand-written notes were taken. Upon completion of the interviews, the notes were synthesized and mapped using the design thinking methodology.

## **Methods of Data Analysis**

### **Qualitative Data**

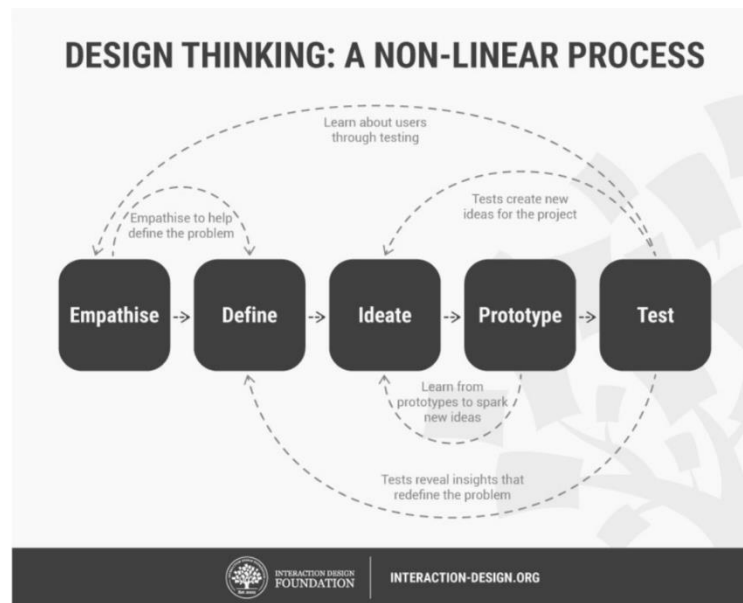
Qualitative data provides insight into the intricacies of a complex issue and enables the researcher to investigate from all angles. Although detailed notes were taken during interviews, having the recorded interviews transcribed allowed for a more thorough review and analysis of

responses. The transcriptions proved to be a valuable resource and made the mapping of the data much easier.

### Mapping of qualitative data

Once interviews were complete, the responses needed to be reviewed and analyzed for common themes and challenges. To complete this analysis, the design thinking methodology was utilized, specifically a synthesis exercise.

The Design Thinking methodology is a “process for creative problem solving” (ideo.com) that focuses on ‘designing for your customer’ (ideo.com). It provides a product development framework centered around the user’s experience. The framework consists of 5 stages, as you will see in *Figure 1*:



*Figure 1 Design Thinking Process diagram, Author/Copyright holder: Teo Yu Siang and Interaction Design Foundation.*

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While the complete Design Thinking Process covers the full scope of product/program development, for the purpose of this study, the focus was limited to the Define phase,



specifically a synthesis exercise. Synthesis is part of the Define stage and occurs directly after interviews are conducted. It is used as a tool to identify pain points and needs that were present in the interviews. It is important to understand that the design thinking methodology makes an important distinction between synthesis and analysis. As Teo and Dam (2020) write in their article about the define stage, “synthesis...involves creatively piecing the puzzle together to form whole ideas...This happens when...we organize, interpret, and make sense of the data we have gathered to create a problem statement” (interaction-design.org). Analysis, on the other hand, “is about breaking down complex concepts and problems into smaller, easier-to-understand constituents. We do that, for instance, during the first stage of the Design Thinking process, the Empathize stage, when we observe and document details that relate to our users.” (interaction.org).

This process was followed by Thomas and Harden (2008) in their study about children’s perceptions of healthy food. The three step thematic synthesis they conducted presented a strong framework for reviewing interview responses from qualitative research studies using the design thinking concept of synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008). To begin their study, they identified eight qualitative studies that addressed children’s perspectives of healthy food. These studies were then electronically coded line by line and those identified codes were manually grouped into a hierarchical tree structure. The final step of this study was generating analytical themes. Researchers used the themes that had emerged through the coding to “infer barriers and facilitators from the views of the children... and then considered the implications of children’s views for intervention development” (Thomas and Harden, 2008, page 7).

As Thomas and Harden (2008) did, I begin with raw interview responses and identified important themes, concepts, and common actions or practices that were discussed by the participants. Using this information, I then extracted what I felt were the pain points and needs of the museum professionals. I defined pain points as barriers, or challenges that the participant faced during their work. Needs were things that the participants could use to make their experience easier. The final step was to assess the implication of these pain points and needs on improving the representation of the female narrative in history museum exhibits.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most significant limitation faced by this study was the small sample size. During the interviews it was uncovered that exhibit development is a much more collaborative process than originally thought and many of the participants had similar roles within their organizations. This limited the types of perspectives that were included in the research. To attempt to off-set this fact, during interviews participants were asked to include thoughts and insight from all their experiences, not just their current role. There was also the limitation of time, both my own and the interviewees. With a time frame of around 6 months, a study has to have a very narrow scope. For interviewees, they are very busy and often only had 30 minutes for an interview. To combat this, the interview guide was provided to them ahead of time so they would have time to look over the questions and start thinking about the questions before the interview itself.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

After conducting extensive research, and considering my personal biases and personal passion for museums and history, a few assumptions were made:

- Interview participants had significant experience and knowledge on the topics of exhibit design and development

- The information provided by those interviewed and references cited is accurate and an authentic representation of facts
- Interviewees were eager and willing to participate in this study
- Those interviewed have direct experience with addressing gender representation within a museum exhibit context
- Participant's identities will remain anonymous

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis Results

#### **Introduction**

This chapter opens with a review of the research objectives, followed by a summary of the interview results. The goal of this research was to understand what history museum professionals are doing to incorporate the female perspective into their exhibits and identify what challenges they are facing in building the holistic female narrative they are aiming for. Participants were interviewed both over the phone and in-person, allowing for fluid conversation and additional probing as needed. All participants were asked the same 9 questions with additional follow-up questions when necessary. The responses to these questions were then synthesized to uncover the needs and pain points of the participants. These needs and pain points can then be used to build recommendations for museum best practices as they relate to incorporating the female narrative into history exhibits. The topics that were covered in the interviews were: general exhibit design processes, methods for incorporating diverse perspectives into exhibits, exhibit assessment tools, and interpretive challenges.

#### **Data: Interview Questions**

Six individuals were interviewed for this study, 2 in person and 4 over the phone. Interviews consisted of 9 questions, which were provided to participants ahead of time so they could review them. Participants were very thorough in their responses and provided a great deal of information (see Appendices B-G). Below some of the responses have been included in italics.

#### **Results**

The responses to this first question revealed that all the organizations that participants worked for had some form of temporary space. This presents additional opportunity to highlight women's stories.

**Begin with verifying understanding of space (# of permanent galleries, temp spaces, theaters, etc.)**

*We have 5 main permanent exhibit spaces (20,000 sq ft), 1 event space, a theatre, and 6 temp gallery spaces (10,000 sq ft) (respondent 1)*

*Our museum consists of one main gallery on the first floor and a temporary space on the second floor (Respondent 2)*

*There are 2 main galleries, the original space that covers WWI-Vietnam war and a newer gallery that is for post Vietnam-present. Since the new gallery opened and took over our former temporary space, we have been using the lobby for temporary displays. (Respondent 3)*

*Our permanent collection is divided into 6 main sections. We then have three temporary galleries. (Respondent 4)*

*We have a very small space. Just one main exhibit hall. Within the hall we have a section dedicated to rotating exhibits (Respondent 6)*

The responses to the second question demonstrated how collaborative the exhibit design process is. Topics for exhibits can come from many different places and involves people with many different areas of expertise. The more individuals that are involved in the process, the greater diversity of perspective will be incorporated into the exhibits, including the female narrative. Many museums have a need for additional outside expertise to assist with more unique topics that the staff does not have the knowledge base of. This need of bringing in outside expert creates its own challenges and becomes a pain point, costing money and requiring time and connections to find someone who meets your needs. The constraints a museum's scope can also create a pain point for museum staff when they constrict storytelling abilities. If a museum's mission establishes a very niche scope, it

can become more difficult to find how women can be accurately and authentically included in the story.

**Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?**

*Content comes from curatorial affairs department. They collaborate with education, publications. It is a real group process. There is the history (curatorial), what you want to say about it(developed through teamwork), and how you say it (developed through team work). There is also the visuals and experience, which mainly lays with design team. (respondent 1)*

*Not creating new exhibits from scratch, just updating. New ED started in April 2019 and decided to broaden scope of museum. Previously only covered specific military division, which was primarily white males. Looking at that story, it is difficult to include females and minorities since white men were the only ones allowed in combat. With broader scope, able to look at supporting units who allowed the division to operate the way they did. (respondent 3)*

*We begin with looking at primary source material. We then build content out from our layout. A big focus is exhibit flow and visitor experience...We have brought in a native American expert to review specific parts of our exhibits (respondent 6)*

The responses to question 3 identified a couple of challenges and pain points in the area of collections. There are techniques that are being used to supplement collections, such as images, interactives, and loans. Artifacts related to women's stories are one gap that was specifically highlighted.

**How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?**

*Review own collection and some other collections to assess available assets to tell story. Front end evaluation to see what people know, what they are interested in, what resonates. Hours and hours of conversation to figure out what is a compelling and engaging way to put the topic out there. Depending on artifacts, sometimes you have to design to design around it. Some artifacts will not be chosen. Want to keep compelling artifacts in-beautiful, Touchstone, carries meaning (Respondent 1)*

*Looking for first hand items that they can say “this was used by... at this battle, etc.”. As the museum works on beefing up own collection, rely on borrowing pieces and getting loans to fill in gaps. (respondent 3)*

*We look for ways to incorporate women’s stories in alternative ways, such as highlighting a female archeologist. (respondent 5)*

*We want to make sure that everything [with an exhibit] is done with a purpose... We want to tell the part of the story that is important (respondent 6)*

When responding to questions 4 and 5, all respondents stated that “diverse representation” was a consideration when developing an exhibit, though many of them had a hard time articulating exactly how and when this was incorporated into the development process. Women are often a specific consideration, though there were very few specifics about techniques for ensuring that the female perspective was included. It was apparent that there is a need for tangible tools and exercises that specifically focus on diversity in perspective and thought.

**Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?**

*Currently working on suffrage exhibit. Want to tell a complex story. Many of the main women were white and middle class. Looking at how middle class women gave up a lot of rights when they got married, “a legal death”. They had the means to speak out against that. Most African American women at the time were enslaved. Indigenous women had own challenges-not given any rights as citizens. Providing broader view of women’s conditions.(respondent 1)*

*Yes it is. We are working on filling gaps in our collection. Promoting specific collection needs to veterans and their families to assist in filling in gaps-i.e. signs asking if people’s mothers, sisters, etc. were involved in first division. Were very successful in receiving leads and material. (respondent 3)*

*With medical history, often females were subjects, not doctors. Or secondary characters, like nurses. Often we would try to have the narrative focus neutral topics and not people. (respondent 5)*

*Museums want to tell authentic and truthful stories based in fact. We don’t want to soften history. It is ok for people to feel uncomfortable. Many stories and parts of history are complex. (respondent 6)*

**Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?**

*Figure out big idea, then what are the chapters, design bubble plan-how big, adjacencies... looking at gender and ethnicity and class to see who is out there. Sometimes is challenging. Dominate culture, being white male, has preserved own history better than others. What is in collection and has been saved is limited. That is changing. (respondent 1)*

*Had main source material that inspired specific group of interest and reached out to author to utilize their contacts. (respondent 3)*

*Partner with other museums. We are somewhat limited in scope by the community we operate in. We have also used outside editors and experts to complement our in house expertise. (respondent 6)*

Responses to questions 6 and 7 were fairly similar across the board. When able, focus groups, surveys, and observation study are used as feedback tools for exhibits. These assessments, however, are usually not targeted to specifically look at diversity in perspectives and narratives within an exhibit. There were no metrics or assessments for evaluating the prevalence of the female narrative or its influence and impact on the visitor experience. Museums have a pain point of resource constraints (time, funding, staff) and not being able to run the assessments they would like. There is also a need for assessments designed to provide feedback on diverse representation.

**What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?**

*Focus groups are usually part of front end of the process. More often use formative assessment. Putting things out there and getting response. More prototype/experimental. Can be interview, survey, or observation (with interactives). Metrics depend on what they are testing. Usability, ask them to read labels and say back what they understood. (respondent 1)*

*American association for state and local history (AASLH) visitor count survey. AASLH provides process and analytics of results. Conduct survey every 5 years. Due to staff constraint, not able to conduct as much assessment as we would like. Did conduct dwell survey to see how people interact with specific portion of hallway that has a lot of things going on. (respondent 3)*



**What are some ways you measure the public's reaction to new content?**

*Interviewed people after engaging with exhibit. Due to timeline for temp exhibit, usually don't make changes unless something doesn't work or mistake is identified.(respondent 1)*

*If they had the resources, interested to see if visitors actually notice the lack of representation of women and minorities. (respondent 3)*

Responses for question 8 demonstrated that museums are continuously reviewing and re-interpreting their objects and narratives. This is part of the nature of museums and academic research. This presents natural opportunities for additional material focused on women to be added in. It is promising to see that many of the organizations have active initiatives to increase the amount of women's stories included in their displays.

**Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?**

*During last renovation about 15 years ago, entire museum closed. Physical and interpretive changes were made. Added exhibits, lobby changed, event space was created... Due to timeline for temporary exhibits, usually don't make changes unless something doesn't work or mistake is identified. (respondent 1)*

*Already completed adding female narrative to WWI section. Currently working on adding the female narrative to WWII section. Adding intro panel about home front and overseas, looking at nurses core, WACs, etc. 6888, all African American women group sent to Europe to help process mail. Large backlog and hurting morale on the front. Present soldier letters that demonstrate impact of backlog being fixed. Look at Rosie the Riveter and Wendy the welder as they worked on tanks used by the division. Any unit with a documented direct connection to the division is now in-scope. Incorporating red ball express, truck/logistics, mostly African American men. (Respondent 3)*

*We did an exhibit on a local, well known freedom seeker. Her family was well known and proud of their story. As we reviewed the documentation and newspaper articles about her, there were discrepancies discovered with the family story. The exhibit told the story we were able to verify with sources, changing the narrative from what have traditional been told (Respondent 6)*

The responses from this final question illuminated how some challenges are universal for all museums while others are unique to a museum's size or other specific factors. When considering how to address concerns with a lack of the female narrative, the solution will look different for

different institutions. It will need to have flexibility to be tailored to each institution's situation. The main universal one was resource constraints, both resources and space. Some of the unique ones were local politics and navigating public opinion.

**What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is facing?**

*The pace. Understaffed and not enough money. Hire temp preparers for production crew. May also use assistance with graphics, etc. (respondent 1)*

*Space-when looking to add more information for a more inclusive story, need to subtract from what is there. Need to determine What parts of the story can be condensed or what part can be removed to add new stories. Can create content, need to find physical space for it. Using space in different ways, condensing information, Rotating panels so they are not out all the time, mount temporary displays. Usually rotating lobby exhibits are based around big anniversaries and events.(respondent 3)*

*It is difficult to create a narrative that is easy to understand for everyone. There is also the influence of donors and administration to take into account.(respondent 4)*

*It is difficult to tell a well known story. Everyone feels they know it. The facts may not add up, or it is based on oral histories. (respondent 6)*

## **Conclusions**

These six interviews conveyed an exceptional amount of information and insight. The participants were eager and enthusiastic to share their broad range of experiences, and had great knowledge to share. Through the nine questions that were asked, I was able to address the question of what pain points and needs museum professionals have in presenting a holistic, authentic female narrative. The main pain points that were identified through these interviews were lack of specific expertise internally, constraint of scope due to mission, gaps in collections, lack of resources to conduct targeted assessments, and needed to navigate local politics and

public opinion/influence. The needs that were identified were tangible tools and exercises focused on incorporating diverse representation into exhibit development processes and assessments that focuses on evaluating diverse representation.

## Chapter 5 Research Implications and Recommendations

### **Objectives**

This study sought to answer the research question of how history museums can better incorporate the female narrative into exhibits, by gaining an understanding of how today's museum professionals are addressing diversity and inclusion and what challenges they are facing in presenting the holistic narrative they are aiming for. Through a thorough literature review and interviews with highly qualified, knowledgeable museum experts, significant insight was gained into what can be done to support history museums in better integrating the female narrative into their exhibits. The literature review provided a strong knowledge foundation of the current state of the museum field and common practices, while the interviews added in-depth insight and perspective from professions in the field today. Participants were able to contribute their first-hand experiences and knowledge to add dimension to the academic perspectives presented in the literature review.

### **Summary**

While existing literature provides theories and proposals for best practices, conversations with participants revealed where within the exhibit development process, these methodologies should be applied. The participants agreed that diversity is an important element of exhibit development and something that needs to be talked about in the museum field. Having space for temporary exhibits provides a great opportunity to highlight female stories and strengthen the female narrative that is presented in the museum. During the process of developing new content and exhibits, outside expertise is often used as a great resource to supplement in-house knowledge and include more voices and perspectives into the process.

Updating current exhibits, on the other hand, presents more difficult challenges. As respondent 3 mentioned, space is limited, and in order to add more information about women's stories, other information must be removed or condensed. In some situations, additional panels or images can be added to expand the area available for exhibit content.

For both temporary and permanent exhibits, collections play an important role in creating the narrative and determining what perspectives will be shared. Respondent 6 (Appendix G), discussed how "artifacts drive the story." Both respondent 3 (Appendix D) and 6 (Appendix G) mentioned efforts to expand their collections in an intentional way to include artifacts that are related to women. This included using social media, and museums do have ways to supplement the gaps they find in their collections, such as loans and images. All respondents mentioned utilizing loans when needed to fill gaps their own collection might have.

From the very broadest lens, the incorporation of the female narrative can be traced to a museum's mission. Respondent 2 discussed how important it is that all material in the galleries matches the museum's mission (Appendix C). The mission guides acquisition policies, content creation, programming, and the main message of exhibits. Respondent 3 provided a great example of how an organization's message can hinder the process of creating a robust female narrative. See Appendix D:

*". New ED started in April 2019 and decided to broaden scope of museum. Previously only covered specific military division, which was primarily white males. Looking at that story, it is difficult to include females and minorities since white men were the only ones allowed in combat. With a broader scope, able to look at supporting units which allowed the division to operate the way they did."*

Assessment is an important phase of exhibit development. It allows a museum to understand how their exhibits are being perceived by the public and if they are achieving their goals. Continuing to adapt and improve is vital for museums to stay relevant, and reflection and assessment are catalysts for that process. With the exception of one, all participants have experience with various types of assessments at different phases of the process. Each assessment had a targeted purpose for being conducted (See Appendix A )

*Focus groups are usually part of front end of the process. More often, we use formative assessment. Putting things out there and getting response. More prototype/experimental. Can be interview, survey, or observation (with interactives). Metrics depend on what they are testing. Usability, ask them to read labels and say back what they understood. Tested feedback stations and interactive in current exhibit. Interviewed people after engaging with exhibit.*

Conducting assessments is greatly impacted by the resources available to an institution, be it time, funding, or staff. Respondents 2,3, and 4 (Appendices B, C, and D ) mentioned not being able to conduct the evaluations they would like. Visitor studies can provide great insight and valuable information that museums can use to make improvements and changes.

The greatest surprise that I discovered during my research was the strength of the influence of external factors have on the development of exhibit narratives. As demonstrated by the story of the freedom seeker respondent 6 (Appendix F) shared, often communities have local stories and oral histories that have been past down for generations and weaved into the fabric of people's identities. When the common told story does not align with documentation and verifiable facts, it is the museum's job to tell the truth and reframe the events based on supported

evidence. This re-assessing can result in public pushback and negative public opinion, placing museum professionals in a difficult position. Museum's must find the balance between maintaining their integrity and honoring their community and tradition.

### **Implications**

This research study revealed how complex historical interpretation is and how many elements are involved in exhibit development. Outside expertise, loans, collections and images, mission, and assessment tools all impact the representation and inclusion of the female narrative within history museum exhibits. One implication of this study is that while the importance of diversity and inclusion is understood conceptually within the museum field, there is a lack of actual techniques and processes to facilitate these conversations and impact the presentation and inclusion of the female narrative in museum exhibits. Respondent 6 discussed how their process begins with source material and an exhibit layout. These are concrete tools and processes that museum professionals use to ensure accuracy and authenticity in the information they are sharing.

Another implication of this study is the importance of staff diversity. Those who are creating the narratives and stories have the greatest influence over what is included and how the information is presented. As mentioned in the literature review, only 38% of board chairs are females (Boardsource, 2017). Boards are responsible for hiring executive directors who then hire additional staff, and so on. The female narrative will not receive appropriate attention until more women are involved in the process of creating it.

Progress is being made on this front. According to a study conducted by the Association of Art Museum Directors, the percentage of female directors within the surveyed museums increased from 43% to 48% from 2013 to 2016 (2016). While this is only a small, incremental increase, it does show movement in the right direction. Changes are occurring at some of the nation's largest museums. The National Gallery of Art currently has a female director, along with the National Museum of American History and National Air and Space Museum, all the first women to hold their respective positions (McGlone, 2019).

Beyond staff, programs like the launch of the Smithsonian Women's history initiative, supported by a \$2 million allocation from Congress (McGlone, 2018), shows great momentum towards women's stories receiving the attention and recognition they deserve. This leads to the next implication of this study. If the female narrative is going to receive more attention and greater incorporation into museums, actions need to be intentional. Museum staff is very busy, and implementation change takes significant time and effort. As respondents 2 and 6 mentioned, they have used very targeted and intentional methods to improve female representation within their collections. Exhibit development itself is an intentional process, with every decision thoughtfully reviewed and considered. How the female narrative is presented needs to become an integrated and standard part of the process.

### **Recommendations**

Museums are institutions of learning and history and should accurately reflect not only the current communities they serve but the history they are preserving and sharing. In order to build this holistic and authentic narrative, museum professionals need to be armed with the



appropriate tools and resources that will enable them to complete their work to its fullest potential. This begins with ensuring women are hired into decision-making roles in museums. It is senior leaders in museums who are determining what is being presented, and the more women are involved in that process, the stronger the female perspective will be represented.

There are a few specific actions that museums and museum professionals can take to improve the diversity of their staff. First, be very strategic on where and how you are recruiting. Look outside the organization for referrals and recommendations from leaders in other organizations in the community. Work with community representatives to better understand the community needs and connect with potential candidates who may be outside the current "network" of the board and staff. People's networks usually consist of other individuals who are relatively similar. It takes a very intentional, targeted approach to break out of that cycle to truly grow the diversity and inclusion of an organization. A board matrix is a very useful tool for addressing diversity on the board. The matrix allows a board to establish the organization's needs, assess the board's current status, and identify gaps that need to be addressed when it is time to fill a position. It creates a foundation for establishing criteria to use for recruitment and evaluation of potential new board members.

There also needs to be interventions that address all parts of the exhibit development process. The initial planning phase is the most critical. Because updating displays and exhibits to include the female narrative is more challenging than including it in an exhibit in the first place, it is more critical to address at the initial process level. As respondent 3 mentioned, modifying existing material makes it much more challenging to make significant, consequential changes. Many of the constraints and frameworks are already created.

For this reason, the female narrative needs to be a consideration from the very beginning of the process. Curators and other museums professionals have standards and best practices that are well established and respected. These practices establish credibility, accuracy, and authenticity of the information being presented. Taking advantage of such a strong existing framework, the female narrative should become integrated into these methodologies to address the issue at a systemic level.

Staff and board members should receive annual "unconscious bias" training, empowering them to identify their own unconscious biases and arming them with tools to counter those patterns of thought. By learning what your own biases are, you become more aware of them and can be intentional about overcoming them. It should also be the expectation that when researching content for an exhibit, at least one third to half of the primary sources should be written or created by women. Women's perspectives can not be presented authentically if their own chronically of their experiences are not read and considered.

Museums themselves need to view the female narrative as a factor in decisions at the institutional level. Beginning with mission, this then influences hiring practices, exhibit themes, temporary exhibit topics, and collection policies. The focus on the female narrative needs to be intentional, targeted and fully supported, both in terms of staff and funding. In order for this to happen, I believe that improving the diverse representation within exhibits needs to be incorporated into all museums' strategic plans. The strategic plan is the playbook, the guide that museum leaders should be looking to when making all decisions. Incorporating this into the strategic plan forces boards to develop specific objectives and actional plans that are measurable and will hold everyone accountable to the commitments that were made.

Building a strong female narrative, either from scratch or as an enhancement, requires significant time. It may be necessary to locate loans, contact external expertise, license images, etc. Even the simple act of identifying the stories, documentation, and primary source material will take additional time when the objective is to uncover female stories that have traditionally gone un-or under-recognized. All of these facts need to be accounted for in the exhibit development timeline and budget.

While guidelines and protocols exist for the care and handling of historical artifacts, the same should exist for the content part of the museum as well. Information needs to be regularly reviewed for inclusion and diversity. Concrete, tangible tools and resources need to be created that target the inclusion of the female narrative and perspective in the content that is being created.

All these changes can be made and knew tools utilized, but with assessment tools, there is very little value. Assessments, surveys, and visitor studies, are all standard parts of museum operations, especially in the education department. As respondent 2 discussed (Appendix C ) *[We] Did previews. Conducted a few targeted focus groups, one specifically looking at color enhancement images. Most of current feedback is received through the education department, often through observation studies.*

When considering the female narrative, the evaluation needs to go beyond the binary consideration of present or not. It is about the quality of representation and what message is being conveyed. Respondent 6 discusses this topic (Appendix G )

*Museums want to tell authentic and truthful stories based in fact. We don't want to soften history. It is ok for people to feel uncomfortable. Many stories and parts of history are complex. For example, during WWII, many soldiers brough souvenirs home from Europe. Display this items is*

*somewhat controversial, but it is about context. Museums should not be afraid to tell ugly stories.*

Post-visit surveys should include questions about how visitors perceive the female narrative and what information they are taking away with them. Questions such as, "*what role did women play in xyz event?*" and "*on scale from 1-5, what was the impact of women's involvement in xyz?*" present museum professionals with insight into the effectiveness of the presentation of the female narrative and if the appropriate message is being conveyed.

Beyond having a tangible assessment that targets diverse representation, museums also need to think about who is being included in the studies. Similar to addressing staff diversity, museums need to expand outside of their standard community and ensure that all perspectives are being included and presented with the opportunity to be heard. Museums should be working with community centers, schools, religious centers/organizations, and other cultural institutions to build relationships and ensure that the community feels involved and represented within the exhibits.

For the female narrative specifically, museums should work with women's social and professional groups to recruit study participants. This is also a great opportunity to build-up a museum's collection of female related artifacts and capture women's oral histories. Museums need to capitalize on any opportunity to grow the documentation and source material related to women's stories. Any local event honoring or related to women (exhibit openings, statue unveilings, honor dinners, etc.) should be viewed as a chance to record women's stories for future generations. History museums could even work with women's groups to assist them in recording their history and story so that resources will be available if the museum chose to highlight them in the future. This is an area that I have found extremely interesting and would

enjoy pursuing further with additional research. Museums not only need to present the past, but assist with preserving and documenting the present. With the rise of social media, there is a great opportunity for museums to assist in the documenting of current events. I think it would be very interesting to study the impact of the documenting and collecting processes of current events on the museum narratives. There is great potential for proactivity to influence future museum narratives and I think research needs to be conducted to understand what that impact would be. Women are 50% of the population and have contributed significantly to society throughout all of history. Beyond the fact that it is right and fair to give women's stories the recognition they deserve, it is also in the best interest of accuracy and truthfulness. It needs to become part of standard operating procedure, evaluation criteria and established as the expectation for all museums. If there was one thing that I would recommend for all history museums to implement to enhance the representation of the female narrative within their exhibits, it would be to go through the process of creating a "women's only tour," developing a guided tour that strictly talks about women. Think about what artifacts and images are on display that could be part of the story. Are there stories that can be shared with visitors that are not included in the exhibit content? What parts of the museum have the fewest talking points? Which parts of the most? Are the stories showing women as independent individuals or extensions of their male counterparts? Once all these questions have been asked, think through what can be done to fill the gaps that may have been identified. Perhaps programming, support material, etc. can be used to supplement exhibit content and space constraints.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Intro:** Hi, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As you know, my name is Morgan and I am a graduate student at Belmont studying non-profit leadership. I am currently working on my thesis researching how history museums represent women and the female narrative in their exhibits.

Before, we get started, I would like to review this Recording Permission form to confirm we have consent to record this interview.

Please state your name, organization, and position for the record.

1. Begin with verifying understanding of space (# of permanent galleries, temp spaces, theaters, etc.)
2. Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
3. How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
4. Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
5. Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
6. What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?
7. What are some ways you measure the public’s reaction to new content?
8. Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
9. What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is facing?

## Appendix B: Interview Summary

Respondent #1

Date: November 26, 2019

Position: Director of exhibitions

1. Overview of space
  - a. 5 main permanent exhibit spaces(20,000 sq ft), 1 event space, theatre, 6 temp gallery spaces (10,000 sq ft)
  - b. 7 openings a year, department is 4 people, down from ten 20 years ago
2. Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
  - a. Content comes from curatorial affairs department. Collaborate with education, publications. A real group process. There is the history (curatorial), what you want to say about it(teamwork), and how you say it (team work). There is also the visuals and experience, which mainly lays with design team. Mostly topics come from leadership of institution. Topic is appropriate timing, or new collection, or opportunity from outside, or travelling exhibits. Will often bring in items on loan. One current exhibit is all loans. One exhibit is all reproductions of photographs, about half are from collections. One temp exhibit the topic was crowd sourced-had public vote on topic they wanted to see.
3. How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
  - a. Curator heads this process. Second sources, Review own collection and some other collections to assess available assets to tell story. Front end evaluation to see what people know, what they are interested in, what resonates. Hours and

hours of conversation to figure out what is a compelling and engaging way to put the topic out there. Depending on artifacts, sometimes you have to design to design around it. Some artifacts will not be chosen. Want to keep compelling artifacts in-beautiful, Touchstone, carries meaning

4. Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
  - a. Figure out big idea, then what are the chapters, design bubble plan-how big, adjacencies. Plan morphes-have materials or don’t, may need gathering space, interactive. All these factors impact floor plan
  
5. Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
  - a. Also looking at gender and ethnicity and class to see who is out there. Sometimes is challenging. Dominate culture, being white male, has preserved own history better than others. What is in collection and has been saved is limited. That is changing. Currently working on suffrage exhibit. Want to tell a complex story. Many of the main women were white and middle class. Looking at how middle class women gave up a lot of rights when they got married, “a legal death”. They had the means to speak out against that. Most African American women at the time were enslaved. Indigenous women had own challenges-not given any rights as citizens. Providing broader view of women’s conditions. Will then look more closely at activists in Chicago. Not that many materials about African American women, even Ida B Wells-not many physical items.

6. What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?
  - a. Focus groups are usually part of front end of the process. More often use formative assessment. Putting things out there and getting response. More prototype/experimental. Can be interview, survey, or observation (with interactives). Metrics depend on what they are testing.
7. Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
  - a. Entire museum closed. Physical and interpretive changes were made. Added exhibits, lobby changed, event space created. In 2010-renovated storage space into gallery. 2015-renovated theater. Currently updating student orientation and lunch space-new tech, display screens, etc.
8. What are some ways you measure the public's reaction to new content?
  - a. Usability, ask them to read labels and say back what they understood. Tested feedback stations and interactive in current exhibit. Interviewed people after engaging with exhibit. Due to timeline for temp exhibit, usually don't make changes unless something doesn't work or mistake is identified. For children's interactive, had to change materials as original items were not durable enough
9. What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is
  - a. The pace. Understaffed and not enough money. Hire temp preparers for production crew. May also use assistance with graphics, etc. Current temp exhibit was built by production crew of all women, one who was trans.

### Appendix C: Interview Summary

Interview was not able to be recorded due to being over the phone. The below is a paraphrase of the conversation

Respondent: 2

Date: November 26, 2019

Position: Executive Director

1. Overview of space
  - a. 1 main gallery and 1 temporary gallery (2,100 sq ft). 30,000 sq ft and have 500 artifacts on display, 12 are loans
2. Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
  - a. The most important thing is to match our mission. For the permanent gallery, our thinking began with three facets of war-Social/political/military, which all converge to create chaos. The decision was made that the narrative would be based on themes, not chronology. Nine themes were selected. This enabled a more complex story telling. There were some motifs that ran through the entire exhibit. More technical, logistical information about battles, etc. were included on year pillars throughout the gallery. It was decided that a traditional RFP process was not going to be used. Instead, staff went out and found exhibits that excited them and looked at what firms did them. The firm also had to provide full services-design, fabrication, and installation. Started with eighteen and narrowed down to six based on assessment criteria. Clients of the top firms were interviewed and each of the firms presented a proposal. This narrowed it down to two firms, which staffs then did field visits for to determine final selection.

- b. For temporary exhibits, staff submit proposals that are reviewed semi-annually by a committee of educators, curators, and some visitor services staff. Anyone can submit an idea using a proposal form that includes what the exhibit hopes to achieve, potential artifacts that would be included, and estimated cost. The committee passes along their top choices to the executive director and they approve. Often the topic will align with a grant, which is the case with the current temporary exhibit. The plan is to re-apply for that grant to support the next temp exhibit.
3. How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
  - a. Lighting and non-traditional color palette were very intentional design decisions to support the narrative to help build a visitor experience.
4. Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
  - a. It is important for people to see themselves represented in images. We were intentional about showing a variety of faces in the exhibit
5. Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
  - a. When developing exhibit content, the curators decided themes and scholars gave stories that were required to be included.
6. What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?



- a. Did previews. Conducted a few targeted focus groups, one specifically looking at color enhancement images
7. What are some ways you measure the public's reaction to new content?
  - a. Most of current feedback is received through the education department, often through observation studies.
8. Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
  - a. Major changes were made when the museum moved into current space. Most recently we underwent some changes with the label fonts to address accessibility/ADA compliance.
9. What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is facing
  - a. As a museum, we help communities grappling with social crises. Where do museums fit in? Should they be advocates? Should they let the collection/exhibit speak for itself, debunking xyz?

## Appendix D: Interview Summary

Respondent #3

Date: December 23rd, 2019

Title: exhibition and collections processing technician

1. Overview of space
  - a. 2 main galleries-WWI to Vietnam, post Vietnam to present day (built in 2016/17 as part of renovation. Lost temporary exhibit space to this new gallery, so now create pop-up displays in lobby.
2. Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
  - a. Not creating new exhibits from scratch, just updating. New ED started in April 2019 and decided to broaden scope of museum. Previously only covered specific military division, which was primarily white males. Looking at that story, it is difficult to include females and minorities since white men were the only ones allowed in combat. With broader scope, able to look at supporting units who allowed the division to operate the way they did.
3. How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
  - a. Focus on collecting artifacts that have a documented, direct connection to Division or soldier from the division. Providedanced pieces. Looking for first hand items that they can say “this was used by... at this battle, etc.”. As the museum works on beefing up own collection, rely on borrowing pieces and getting loans to fill in gaps.

4. Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
  - a. Yes it is. We are working on filling gaps in our collection. Promoting specific collection needs to veterans and their families to assist in filling in gaps-i.e. signs asking if people’s mothers, sisters, etc. were involved in first division. Were very successful in receiving leads and material.
5. Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
  - a. Had main source material that inspired specific group of interest and reached out to author to utilize their contacts
6. What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?
  - a. Currently don’t do assessment before bringing material into gallery
7. What are some ways you measure the public’s reaction to new content?
  - a. American association for state and local history (AASLH) visitor count survey. AASLH provides process and analytics of results. Every 5 years. Due to staff constraint, not able to conduct as much assessment as they would like. Did conduct dwell survey to see how people interact with specific portion of hallway that has a lot of things going on. If they had the resources, interested to see if visitors actually notice the lack of representation of women and minorities. Survey does include visitor demographics. Showed pretty even split between men and women, but majority white. Park is working on attracting more diverse audience.

8. Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
  - a. Already completed adding female narrative to WWI exhibit. Currently working on adding the female narrative to WWII section. Adding intro panel about home front and overseas, looking at nurses core, WACs, etc. 6888, all African American women group sent to Europe to help process mail. Large backlog and hurting morale on the front. Present soldier letters that demonstrate impact of backlog being fixed. Look at Rosie the Riveter and Wendy the welder as they worked on tanks used by the division. Any unit with a documented direct connection to the division is now in scope. Incorporating red ball express, truck/logistics, mostly African American men.
9. Greatest interpretive challenge
  - a. Space-when looking to add more information for a more inclusive story, need to subtract from what is there. Need to determine What parts of the story can be condensed or what part can be removed to add new stories. Can create content, need to find physical space for it. Using space in different ways, condensing information, Rotating panels so they are not out all the time, mount temporary displays. Usually rotating lobby exhibits are based around big anniversaries and events. No current plan to expand space. Just completed multi-million renovation.
10. Anything I should have asked, you would like to add
  - a. Try to use own artifacts/collection whenever possible. Working with loans is a large hassle. Try to build up collection to match the interpretation they want. Want interpretations to reflect collection. Usually turn away more than take-in.

Will purchase some items, but most collection comes from donations. Strong connection to active division and encourage soldiers to donate items if they would like.

Appendix E: Interview Summary

**Information to come. Do to Covid-19, notes were not able to be obtained in time for defense**

### Appendix F: Interview Summary

Interview was not able to be recorded due to being over the phone. The below is a paraphrase of the conversation

Respondent 5

Date: January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020

Position: Director of STEAM and Innovation

- 1) Overview of space
  - a) Previously worked at International surgical science museum and Landmark Museum.  
Both had spaces for temporary exhibits/displays
- 2) Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
  - a) Topics usually came from CEO level. Once the topic was determined, it is important to build a narrative that is easy to understand for everyone.
- 3) How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
  - a) We look for ways to incorporate women's stories in alternative ways, such as highlighting a female archeologist.
- 4) Is "diverse representation" a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
  - a) With medical history, often females were subjects, not doctors. Or secondary characters, like nurses. To counter this we would try to have the narrative focus be neutral topics and not people.
- 5) Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?

- a) In a former organization, we used to do Best of Exhibits. These allowed for many different stories to be told, all related to a similar concept/topic/idea.
- 6) What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization under go for new content before presenting to the public?
  - a) Unfortunately I do not have any experience in this area
- 7) What are some ways you measure the public's reaction to new content?
  - a) See above answer
- 8) Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?
  - a) While I do not have an example related to an object, I have done some re-framing through programing in my current role. Through my current role I have worked to re-frame what my be perceived as more feminine activities/subjects to be more gender neutral. One example is a quilting activity that I modified to be bookmark making, while still teaching quilting techniques.
- 9) What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is  
  - a) From a design perspective, paint can often pose a great challenge. Certain colors can be difficult to paint over and other times it is difficult to find the exact color you are looking for. From a broader perspective, the influence of donors and administration can often be difficult to manage



### Appendix G: Interview Summary

Interview was not able to be recorded due to being over the phone. The below is a paraphrase of the conversation

Respondent 6

Date: February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Position: Executive Director

- 1) Begin with verifying specifics of space
  - a) We have a very small space. Just one main exhibit hall. Within the hall we have a section dedicated to rotating exhibits (Respondent 6)
- 2) Can you please provide me with a brief overview of your exhibit design process, beginning with determining the topic and moving forward from there?
  - a) Start with what is the story we want to tell. For example, we have a MLH red cross uniform. This is a key element of our WWI section where we talk about women in war. This story was easier to incorporate into a heavily male narrative because there were artifacts in our collection. Artifacts drive the story. We also look at “How do we know”. There may be a lack of documentation related to a topic we want to present. We look for primary source material. We then build content out from our layout. A big focus is exhibit flow and visitor experience...In the past we have brought in a native American expert to review specific parts of our exhibits
- 3) How do you translate the narrative and message you have chosen into physical objects and exhibit content?
  - a) We want to make sure that everything [with an exhibit] is done with a purpose... We want to tell the part of the story that is important. We will even use social media to make a call for new items if we need them to complete an exhibit.

- 4) Is “diverse representation” a specific consideration within your design process? If so, at what point in the process does it begin to become incorporated?
  - a) Museums want to tell authentic and truthful stories based in fact. We don’t want to soften history. It is ok for people to feel uncomfortable. Many stories and parts of history are complex. For example, during WWII many soldiers brought souvenirs home from Europe. Displaying these items is somewhat controversial, but it is about context. Museums should not be afraid to tell ugly stories
- 5) Are there specific strategies you use to assist in understanding the range of perspectives or interpretations surrounding an event or object?
  - a) Partner with other museums. We are somewhat limited in scope by the community we operate in. We have also used outside editors and experts to compliment our in house expertise
- 6) What types of reviews/ assessments does your organization undergo for new content before presenting to the public?
  - a) For temporary exhibits, we make sure our content, design, and flow work with the space. The space can sometimes end up driving part of the story. Outside editors are also a great resource to have fresh eyes look over the content.
- 7) What are some ways you measure the public’s reaction to new content?
  - a) Assessment is focused on the visitor experience. Does the visitor understand the flow of the exhibit, what do they find most interesting, etc?
- 8) Has your museum done any recent changes/modifications to re-frame existing interpretation of an object or narrative?

- a) We did an exhibit on a local, well known freedom seeker. Her family was well known and proud of their story. As we reviewed the documentation and newspaper articles about her, there were discrepancies discovered with the family story. The exhibit told the story we were able to verify with sources, changing the narrative from what have traditional been told
- 9) What are some of the greatest interpretive challenges that you feel your organization is currently facing?
- a)