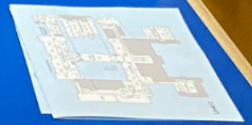


MUSEUM VISITS ARE
HARD ON MY BODY.

REST HERE IF
YOU AGREE.



Beginner's Guide to Museums

Aubrey Parkinson

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Front Cover Image Note:

Artwork: Finnegan Shannon, part of their “Do you want us here or not” collection, 2020. Part of the “Tender Loving Care Exhibition” for contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts.

Photo: Taken by Aubrey Parkinson, January 2024.

Introduction and Author's Note

My intention with this guide is to provide a basic understanding of the working of museums and history from my research and my experiences within various types of museum and archival settings. My experience began in the Shadelands Ranch Museum as a junior docent leading half an hour to hour-long tours. I learned to be flexible in catering to my audience. My second area of experience was my internship with the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. This gave me a more inside perspective on the work of a curator at a national museum. There were many specific challenges that this type of museum has compared to other Smithsonian Institution museums. As they had to organize the exhibits with large planes and scientific displays, rather than just art and smaller artifacts. However, the purpose of this type of museum is different from others, which brought less challenges and more challenges. Additionally, I worked on the North Spokane Library history collection which is now open for public use. This showed me more of local history and a library's different goals and responsibilities to the local public. My most recent type of experience was at the Whitworth University archives through processing collections and helping with displays within the library. Each of these experiences brought many moments of growth and different challenges, which led me to want to develop a project around the topic of museums and spread the knowledge that I received through these experiences and my research to viewers who look at my guide. Additionally, museums can be a beneficial experience full of physical and mental enrichment, however for some it can also hold anxieties and overstimulation depending on the museum. I want to acknowledge all the different emotions and thoughts that museums bring out with all the different topics from the emotionally heavy to the truly fascinating. Museums are important to discover, but we should acknowledge and sit with the feelings we may experience.

Thank you for taking the time to read my project!

Important Note: I will mainly be focusing on museums in the United States. Some of my sources do discuss museums in general globally, however, my experience and knowledge lies mainly in museums in the US. Though I have experience of visiting museums in Europe, I do not have the knowledge or experience of the behind the scenes work. Though there is a lot to say about

museums in the UK, I will not be discussing those museums. Additionally, I will be mentioning my experiences with the museums I have worked in or visited. There are so many museums in the United States, many doing great work and others that could do better, therefore, this is not a complete collection of all museums, but a basic guide that may be a good start. If you would like to discuss museums with me or have more information that you think I would want to know, please email me at aparkinson24@my.whitworth.edu.

I encourage conversation and new ideas!

Brief History of Museums in the US

The museum as we know it did not appear until the second half of the 20th century with a more educational and interactive experience. The early museum in the US was a product of Victorian thought and ideals and the art and anthropology museums. A site of contemplation, appreciation, and preservation.

Museums began in the United States during the Victorian period as a transition point from private discussions of interests such as art, politics, and religion within parlors into the public sphere with libraries, symphonies, art museums, and parks. One of the first of these institutions was the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1870), which is where the picture on the cover of this guide comes from. Art museums were one of the first forms of museums in the US and are still ever-present today with our contemporary art as well as the contemporary art of the Victorians. These were the first of the public spaces that were available to visit at no cost, previously art and music spaces were not free and libraries loaned books only if the person could pay. The purpose for this change was to counteract the increasing vulgarity of the saloons and dance halls that did not fit with the ideals of the Victorians. One famous instance of a mixture of the history museum and the entertainment sphere was P.T. Barnum's museums which housed a variety of historical artifacts alongside curiosities, which is what those at the Boston Fine Arts Museum claimed was vulgar. P.T. Barnum seemed to be one of the first pop culture museums in a way. However, just because the institutions became public, did not mean they were curated to pay attention to the interests of the masses like P.T. Barnum's museums and similar museums,

but focused on the Victorian ideal and a superior thought of masterpiece and what is good. As the turn of the century came about, there was a change from collecting everything to curating and choosing what to display.¹

Adam Gopnik, in his speech at the Eva Holtby Lecture on Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum, summarizes the stages that museums have gone through from museum as mausoleum, museum as machine, museum as metaphor, and museum as mall. His argument is that museums have changed in the way they allow discussion and talking, however, has become what he considers a museum as a mall, in which the museum no longer becomes an educational place and more into a place to sell merchandise.² His argument is valid as I agree that museums seem to often be tourist traps. However, like he said, they have also allowed for more discussion. There are many similarities between the museums we have today to those of the Victorians, however some of the changes have been beneficial to more of the community rather than a select few.

Different Types of Museums in the US and Their Purposes and Goals

There are a vast amount of different museums and each museum has a different goal, intended audience, and specialty. It is important to understand which type of museum you are visiting in order to put on the lens of that subject to understand what questions to ask and what goals the curators may have in designing the exhibit.³ I will mainly discuss art, culture, memorial, and house museums. History museums are probably the ones most thought of when thinking about museums (that and art museums). Their goals and functions are preserving historical artifacts and displaying them for the public to learn about a certain piece of history.

Art museums are one of the oldest forms of museums in the US. According to the book *The Victorian Homefront*, “Among museum directors and managers, a consensus gradually formed: art that disciplined and enlightened was most likely found among the time-tested

¹ Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought & Culture, 1860-1880*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2001, 49, 60-69.

² Adam Gopnick, *The Museum Today*. Toronto: Institute for Contemporary Culture, 2007.

³ For further information on research and a detailed list of all the different types visit: University of Toronto Libraries Museum Studies Information Page; <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/MuseumStudies/artmuseums>

masterpieces of the Old World. Like other Victorians, midcentury museum directors and managers believed that future works of art, architecture, literature, and industrial design would be based on the works of the past. It was the task of their institutions to make these works available and thus to ensure the smooth, continuous flow of history from the past to the present.”

⁴ Art was a major topic of discussion in the lives of the Victorians from their parlors to private and public museums. The scholar of art may look at the art piece with different questions regarding the material used, lighting, brush strokes. However, an art historian may focus more on the artist, context in which it was created, and iconography within the image related to its history.

Another type of museums are cultural museums. An example of this may be the National



Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C.

According to the NMAI director, W. Richard West, he argues that this model of museums is meant as “an international institution of living cultures...[it] is a civic space not just a cultural stop.”⁵ These spaces are meant to teach about cultures and histories that were too often silenced in past museums or history books or not discussed from the perspective of the community. It is important to learn about other cultures and gain a more holistic picture of history, rather than one perspective. The image to the left is part of the exhibit by Preston Singletary, called “Raven and the Box of Daylight”. The exhibit told the creation story of Raven through Singletary’s blown glass art pieces and a surrounding atmosphere of soundscapes.⁶

Memorial museums, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., are meant to teach their audience about a specific horrifying event. According to Amy Sodaro in her book *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, she explains that the three key functions of a memorial museums are to reveal the truth about what happened in the past event by preserving the documentation, to be a space of healing for the community that

⁴ Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought & Culture, 1860-1880*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2001, 65.

⁵ W. Richard West, in Edward P. Alexander (Edward Porter), and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, 2nd ed. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008, 13.

⁶ “Preston Singletary: Raven and the Box of Daylight,” National Museum of the American Indian, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=976>.

was affected and a space of contemplation through memorial, and to educate the visitors of the moral value of “never again” shall this happen or anything similar.⁷ These spaces take a different type of energy and emotional level than other museums, so it is important to take time and really contemplate and sit with the more uncomfortable parts of history.

House museums are simply museums that are within a home and either had some influence from the owner of the house or were taken up by people after the deaths of the owners. Two examples are the Shadelands Ranch Museum in Walnut Creek, California and the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. I have been a docent at the Shadelands Ranch Museum for about four years and through this experience have learned a lot about the Penniman family that lived there. The goal and mission of this house museum, as many of the docents say at the beginning of their tour, is to transport the visitors into the home of an early 20th century family. The house is arranged similar to how it would have been in the years they were there, but a lot of the furniture is not original to the

home. However, the Gardner museum is exactly how it was when Gardner was alive as she put it in the contract that nothing is ever moved or all the artifacts will be given to Harvard University. This is a different style of house museum. I spoke with one of the docents at the museum, and she explained to me how Gardner’s personality and quirks are still found



around the museum, which makes it unique in that way. The image is of one of her living rooms. She collected art pieces and various items and displayed them intending the house to become an art museum of sorts.

⁷ Amy Sodaro, “Memorial Museums: Promises and Limits”, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, Rutgers University Press (2018), 162-163.

Understanding the Work of a Curator on Exhibits

For this section I will be bringing in knowledge from my experience as an intern at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) and my interview with Chloe Dye, curator of the art collection at Microsoft, but in the past worked on a historical collection on the Panama Canal. This section is intended to show readers some of the behind the scenes of museum work and how curators focus on their intended audience and create exhibitions with their selected artifacts.

Beginning with NASM, for background, I interned there under the curator for the modern military aviation department, which includes World War II, Vietnam, and later wars. I mainly sat in on the modern military exhibit staff meetings. Each Smithsonian museum encounters different obstacles in their exhibition creation. NASM specifically has the challenge of organizing and puzzling together large aircraft within one exhibition room. At the time of my internship, NASM was under major renovation of the whole building, so I experienced the processes of developing and reinstalling new exhibits. I did get to see the west end of the museum that was opening. (The east end was where my mentor worked for, so I have not yet seen it updated and it will not be done for a couple more years)⁸ My mentor walked me through the sections of the Early Flight Exhibit to show me the thoughts that go through a curator's head. With the increase in technological and interactive displays in museums, there are processes in curation in making sure that each element works. Lighting, angle, text color and size, and positioning are all parts of the decision making process for creating exhibits and the text that goes along with the artifact. Within the meetings, I learned that curators in the past worked on large blueprint papers and drew the artifacts or have replicas in the quadrants of the paper. However, now they use online software, such as online documents and concept art and blueprints created by contractors. My

⁸ Funny Story: I got to go into the exhibits of the west wing of NASM that was opening to the public in about a month. So I walked around with the curators in the office I interned at and I just listened to their commentary on the exhibits. They also told me it is important to test all the interactive exhibits, and they tested one about early flight mechanism. It had a crank that would push a replica of the wing material from the Wright Brothers' era of flight and the harder you cranked the higher the object went in the air. They broke it. I was trying to hold in my laughter seeing Smithsonian curators break one of the interactive exhibits, but it was fun to see the nerdy side of the curators and this side of their job. It makes sense to really test the limits of the mechanism as thousands of kids will be pushing these machines to their limits.

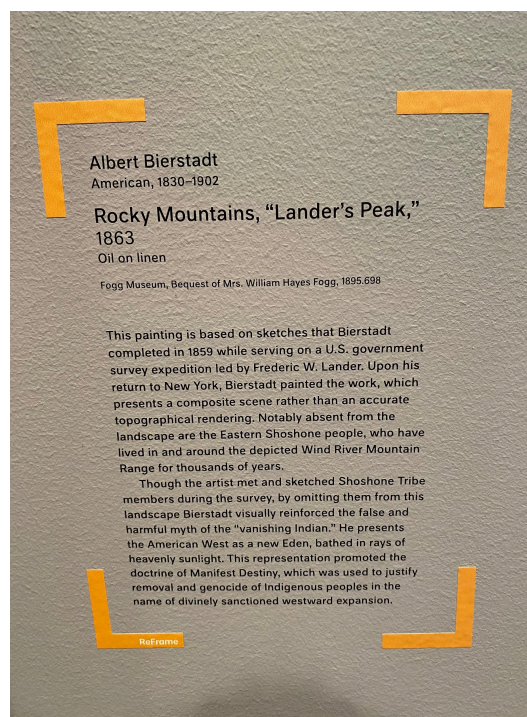
mentor said that he missed the old way of working on exhibits. However, curation at a major museum like the Smithsonian encounters very different obstacles than a small local museum like the one where I was a docent.

My interview with Chloe Dye led me more to knowledge on the smaller museum and collection side of museum work. The job of the curator is to follow the goal and mission of the museum. I asked her about the issues of patrons and donors having a say in the museum exhibit design and she explained that it helps to have a strong mission to fall back on if the donor is suggesting ideas that are not necessarily the best for the exhibit's design. Budget and finances, she told me, is a fascinating topic within museum research as the design of the exhibit and the focus hinges on where the money goes. Overall, she explains that museums should always be evolving and never stay the same and that museum founders are flawed. We should always focus on changing with the context we live in and making sure to listen to the audience that comes into the museums.

What are Museums Doing Today to Turn From Their Colonial Pasts?

There are several strategies in which museums are working on improving the ethics of their museum to respond to the many problematic historical elements of their collections and collection keeping. There are two major methods: provenance research and repatriation, alongside ownership changes and acknowledgements. Some of this came from my interview with Chloe Dye and research from other sources, but I will also show an example that I have encountered on my personal museum journey.

Provenance is the process in which researchers track the original owner of an artifact. An example of this could be finding the original owner of the artifacts stolen by the Nazi's or the artifacts within many museums that were stolen



through colonialism. Repatriation is the action of bringing an artifact out of the collection of a museum to return it to the original owner. Some other examples have been museums dedicated to the history of a minority group such as museums for Native American heritage or adding plaques that explain a more nuanced history of a particular item. One of the methods I saw in my personal journey through museums was at the Harvard Art Museums in Boston, Massachusetts. Their method was to keep the artwork up, but nuance the piece with the complex history and the reason why it is problematic or disregarding the silences in history. Within this piece, the description tells of a problematic idea within history and historical writing that sets an exclusive mindset. It is important to expose and realize these types of mindsets that have been prevalent within historical scholarship and continue to set a flawed view of history. Having a description like this, which was called the “Reframe” series, are meant to help visitors see outside of the painting they are looking at.

Conclusion

There is a part of museum discourse, specifically art museums, that hold these institutions to an extremely high esteem. In Adam Gopnik's speech, he said,

“I believe in museums. I believe in them as the necessary circuit maker and breaker for a process that is inextricably social but finally individual, and I accept, with as much good humor as I can find, the reality that some ever-changing form of social ritual is always needed to bring the two worlds, what’s on the wall and what’s in your head, in harmony.”⁹

Within this type of discourse, it puts museums on a pedestal of higher and faultless education that can be problematic and exclusionary. A quote by Adele Z. Silver of the Cleveland Museum of Art seems to sum up the idea of this guide well, she explains that,

“Museums are inventions of men, not inevitable, eternal, ideal, nor divine. They exist for the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use those things”.¹⁰

⁹ Adam Gopnik, *The Museum Today*. Toronto: Institute for Contemporary Culture, 2007, 46.

¹⁰ Adele Z. Silver in Stephen E. Well, *Making Museums Matter*; Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, 30.

Museums should change and should be accessible and contain accessible language for any type of audience. Additionally, there should be open discussion around museums, so that museums are not put on a high pedestal. These institutions have been and are full of problematic views and artifacts, however, it is up to each and every individual viewer to converse with the exhibits and be able to have their own input. Curators do a lot to guide visitors with different goals and reasons which is important work, however, visitors are also an extremely important element in the museum exhibit, and each of us have our own perspective that could contribute to the museum experience.

My goal for this guide was to make a document that is accessible to people who do not want to read the current scholarly discussions, as museums are meant for the public to understand history. It is important to understand that museums are not these divine places that hold unquestionable knowledge and perspective, but should be places for open conversation of differing ideas. Hopefully this guide can give you a base to start at in understanding the museum you may be in, and feel comfortable going into any type of museum. After all, knowledge should be accessible and everyone's perspectives through respectful conversation should be welcomed.

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