Making Meaning Together

Lessons from the Field of American History

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Over the last few years, the field of American history has witnessed an explosion of interest in how contemporary individuals understand and use the past. In 1989, the leading scholarly publication in the field, the *Journal of American History*, devoted a special issue exclusively to the topic of history and memory;[1] prestigious universities have held conferences with titles like "History and Memory" and "How We Learn History: The Past, the Classroom, and Society"; and in 1990, a group consisting primarily of historians founded the Center on History-Making in America, an interdisciplinary initiative at Indiana University that promotes and conducts research on people and the past. While those who call themselves "public historians" have long been interested in citizens' encounters with history, much of the recent movement has gone beyond professionals theorizing about the experiences of others to include gathering and analyzing empirical data such as the attitudes and behaviors of contemporary Americans. These data have allowed scholars to document the range of ways in which people make meaning of the past and explore the workings of memory, narrative, and historical consciousness. Fueling this trend is some serious "reflective practice" in what has been one of the most authoritarian of academic disciplines. The results are a growing concern among some historians with the audiences of history and an increasing desire to see the discipline become more democratic, relevant, and meaningful to a range of citizens. What's this got to do with museum education?

Those who work in history museums, historic sites, and historic houses may already be familiar with this movement, given its potential impact on the interpretation of history. Since the concept of the past is an integral component of many other disciplines, including art, archeology, and science, the importance of this work is clearly not limited to institutions with "history" in their titles. Indeed, a growing understanding of how people make sense of the past is likely to influence the interpretation of art, archeology, and other fields. Yet the connection of this work to museum education is at once more subtle and more complex than the issue of subject matter. The movement afoot in the theory and practice of history is a mirror of quite similar—and fundamental—issues and challenges facing museology today: What is the nature of interpretation? Who makes meaning? How? How might we move beyond the dichotomy that separates "professionals" from "laypersons" to more beneficial and inclusive ways of interacting? How can we revitalize the field and its institutions so that they might serve as tools for all people? Given new understandings of interpretation and of audiences, what new or revised skills might we need to accomplish these goals? As a museum educator, audience researcher, and director of the Center on History-Making in America, I have been amazed to see firsthand how similar are the challenges that face history and museology today—and many other fields of knowledge as well. In the next few pages, I'd like to offer an overview of recent developments in American history and illustrate how similar application of the meaning-making paradigm and related ideas to museum education can help us to create more inclusive and democratic museums—model institutions for a functional and healthy multicultural society. In short, here are some lessons from history for museum education in the present.

The Paradigm of Meaning-Making: Recalling the Nature of "Interpretation"

As this issue of the *Journal of Museum Education* illustrates, the American academy is clearly in the midst of a powerful paradigm shift to embrace the notion of "meaning-making." This paradigm seems to have emerged as a response to and means for dealing with the country's changing cultural landscape and the fact that multiple and often conflicting points of view indeed exist and clash in our society. In the field of communications, many scholars now believe that communication does not occur in a linear fashion, with one active party conveying information to a passive other, but that communication is a process in which meaning is jointly and actively constructed through interaction. Developed further in the work known as cultural studies, this notion has surfaced in a variety of other fields

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as well. While differences do exist in approaches to the notion, most share the growing belief that people who are communicating negotiate power and authority in the making of meaning.

This paradigm has profound implications for history. Long considered by many to involve the expert retrieval of objective truth, recovered through documentable evidence by highly trained individuals, the meaning-making paradigm offers a powerful reminder that history, when viewed as a process, is an *interpretation*—a story or perspective that is crafted, albeit with expert documentation, by certain people for certain ends. And even though the historian might communicate his or her particular interpretation with authority, another person who encounters it may yet make very different meaning of it from that which the historian intended. Thus while historians may continue to be the most recognized and valued presenters of the past in our society, their products are interpretations, which can then be interpreted further by those who read them. It seems increasingly clear that professionals and citizens "share authority" for constructing meaning of the past.[2] It is no wonder that growing numbers of historians are working to understand the ways that audiences think and interact with history.

Much of the same may be said for museum educators, for, like historians, the act of "interpretation" is our raison d'être. And like our fellow "keepers of culture," we seem to have lost sight of the meaning of the term "interpretation" as a viewpoint or particular understanding and have defined it instead in our minds and in the minds of many visitors as immutable truth, operating as if the results of our work can and must be experienced in just one way. Like historians, museum educators do not need to abandon the role of purveyors of excellent interpretation. The paradigm of meaning-making simply opens the door for museology, as well as history, to consider some desperately needed expansion.

Who Does It and How? Everyperson His or Her Own Historian

At the core of the recent movement in history is the revival and advancement

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of a concept expressed eloquently, accessibly, but unfortunately in gendered language by Carl Becker in 1932: "Everyman his own historian." Arguing that all history is essentially the same, whether it is about military figures or everyday life, Becker shows that all people regularly use knowledge of the past to various ends in the present and in the process exercise research skills similar to those of the "expert" historian.

> If the essence of history is the memory of things said and done, then it is obvious that every normal person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history. . . . Mr. Everyman, as well as you and I, remembers things said and done and must do so at every waking moment.

Becker recognized the social nature of the meaning-making process. History is

> an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes. In thus creating his own history, there are, nevertheless, limits which Mr. Everyman may not overstep without incurring penalties. The limits are set by his fellows. If Mr. Everyman lived quite alone in an unconditioned world he would be free to affirm and hold in memory any ideal series of events that struck his fancy, and thus create a world of semblance quite in accord with the heart's desire. Unfortunately, Mr. Everyman has to live in a world of Browns and Smiths . . . which has taught him the expediency of recalling certain events with much exactness.[3]

Building on these ideas in recent work, David Thelen and others have coined and promoted the term "history-making" to refer to all the different ways humans interpret or make meaning of the past, from "reminiscence beside a fireplace or restoration of a piece of furniture"[4] to the writing of books and the production of exhibits and documentaries. The concept of "history-making" joins the notion of history as process with the meaning-making paradigm. Two important effects of this concept are to further Becker's effort to democratize history activity and to suggest that understanding the ways people make history is a critical step in understanding how meaning about the past is negotiated.

Indeed, recent studies in a number of fields illuminate the pervasive and varied ways in which ordinary people relate to the past. Using ethnography, for example, Henry Glassie studied an Irish community called Ballymenone and described how people interpret the past by telling stories, arranging their household goods, and going about their everyday occupations. Drawing upon sociology and communications theory, Tamer Katriel and Thomas Farrell examined the making and using of scrapbooks for pleasure, reminiscence, communication, and the maintenance of relationships.[5] Other explorations of history-making activity can be found in the literature of psychology, anthropology, and communications.

As Thelen describes, understanding the range of ways that people make meaning of the past and using that broad spectrum as the basis for public history can open the door to new directions in exhibits, textbooks, activities, films, and other media that might indeed excite and involve Americans in history.[6] Research as well as reflective practice in public history has shown that many of the ways people relate to the past in their everyday lives are quite active and integral components of the ways they make sense of interpretations about the past presented to them by historians in museums, theaters, and classrooms. Such expansion, therefore, seems not only logical but necessary if historians wish to communicate meaningfully with the public.

While this philosophy can lead to exciting new projects and programs, it can also help to explain the success of certain techniques and practices. For example, many historians wondered why Ken Burns's television film *The Civil War* was so popular and successful in the eyes of the public. To explore how viewers made sense of the series, David Glassberg analyzed 444 letters received by Ken Burns in response to the film. The letters suggest that those

writing viewed *The Civil War* most often in the context of their own family history but also in the context of their previous television watching experiences and their previous knowledge of the war. Glassberg concluded that Burns's series created "spaces for sharing information," which "viewers filled with stories," and that the letters and diaries "made viewers feel closer to the process of history-making, not passive and removed."[7] In sum, *The Civil War* encouraged and supported some of the personal ways people relate to the past far more effectively than have many documentaries before it.

Who and How? Everyperson His or Her Own Interpreter

What about museum education? Once again, we may see our field mirrored in the history movement, but there's a lesson to be learned from Becker: namely, everyperson his or her own interpreter. Like history, making meaning of objects is something we do all the time, not just in museums and not just those of us who get paid for it. Whether art, history, science, anthropology, popular culture, or kitsch, we each exercise a variety of skills—including identification, description, and evaluation—that are similar to those of the museum professional in responding to objects in most contexts. Like history-making, those processes are social: the meanings we make are influenced and constrained by other people, including those with whom we participate in relationships and social groups.[8] And as is the case with history-making, there exists a range of ways in which we respond to and make sense of objects: we reminisce about them, imagine and fantasize with them, worship and revere them, treat them as symbols, react unconsciously to them, and use them to tell stories to others—often on topics having little to do with the museum's intended "messages." Many of these ways of relating to objects are typically deemed "naive" and inappropriate behavior in museums. Yet our own experiences and recent research attest to the fact that such behaviors can be integral parts of the museum experience, important and satisfying to many visitors. As in the case of history, it seems that understanding the range of ways that people make meaning of objects and using that broadened spectrum as the basis for museum programs and exhibits can open the door to more democratic practices in museums. Such practices can provide opportunities to model and communicate basic values such as pride, respect, and tolerance that grow increasingly crucial for the functioning of multicultural society.

Literature on objects in anthropology, sociology, psychology, communications, ethnic studies, and folklore can help to stimulate our thinking along these lines. Communications research, for example, certainly sheds light on the ways in which people relate to objects as symbolic of values and mnemonic of stories that express those values. In a case study of a rural Pennsylvania community, for example, Christopher Musello examined the use of family objects within the daily lives of community members. He found that families use their possessions to symbolize important people and events and pass on family values embedded in stories.

> Furnishings are largely dependent for their interpretation on the rounds of talk they generate and support about the range of references they embody. In conjunction with talk, they are employed to stimulate and facilitate the transmission of . . . accounts of people and events."

We know that visitors engage in such storytelling in museums all the time. Should that activity and those meanings continue to take second place to the interpretations of museum staff? The popularity of comment books, self-made videos, and computer databases for visitor input in more and more museums suggests otherwise. Understanding the many ways we make meaning of objects in our culture may in fact help us see a wider range of behaviors that museums could be supporting and promoting. In so doing, museums could become cultural havens for, as well as models for, the respectful exploration and exchange of ideas.

Understanding Similarities and Differences

Recognizing the spectrum of history-making activity and the ways that people relate to objects offers hope that we might move beyond the often condescending and limiting dichotomy of professional-expert/layperson-novice that still exists in history and museology alike. Letting go of judging responses as "right" or "wrong" can provide room for something more. But what?

To move toward a practice of history that is more inclusive and democratic, Thelen argues for the need to understand the *similarities and differences* in the ways that people interpret and use the past to create new dialogues among all history-makers.[10] Through the exchange of opinions, reactions, and perspectives, multiple viewpoints and meanings can be explored.

Stuck in the expert/novice linear communication model, some historians do not think to encourage such dialogue or see its great potential for educating about diversity. Michael Frisch relates one such missed opportunity at the point at which history was being presented to the public: an experience of attending a labor history symposium with academics, trade unionists, and community people. The symposium featured the presentation of oral history interviews about steelworkers' strikes organized in the 1930s.

> It was not clear until one overheard comments in the lobby, however, that people had seen it very differently: many of the academics heard in the tapes evidence of the pervasiveness of class conflict and a call to militance inspired by labor's heritage of struggle. But the trade-unionists seemed to come away with a very different message: recalling the "bad old days," they said, made them appreciate the distance between then and now, as measured by their current no-strike contracts, grievance procedures, and pension benefits. But the interviews had not focused on such messages in either sense, and the program offered no opportunity or framework for discussing, contrasting, and evaluating the connection of this particular past to the present. . . . The program ended where it should have begun."[11]

If different voices were to share "interpretive" authority from the start of the process of creating history, there is hope that common ground might also be forged and methods developed for supporting multiple points of view. A new, more inclusive vocabulary could become a shared goal, as well as less judgmental criteria for comparing perspectives. New frameworks and techniques for the practice of history, born

of "shared authority," might then emerge. Thelen offers the idea of a history textbook in which

> teachers, government officials, community activists, history buffs, stamp collectors, farmers, and school children would discuss and negotiate its content. In the course of listening to each other, they might construct a new historical experience.[12]

It is not hard to fantasize the challenge and excitement of such a project or the ideas and educational approaches that could result from such dialogue and others like it.

Museums and Dialogues

In creating museum exhibits and programs that interpret objects, it is similarly time for museum educators to take further steps beyond the expert/novice dichotomy to create more effective ways to share authority for the making of meaning in museums. As in history, such steps can be facilitated by affording more opportunities to explore and promote differences among perspectives while also working toward the creation of expanded but common ground.

In the realm of products, such as exhibits and programs, we have laid some important groundwork already, through the growing use of feedback books, computer databases, and other mechanisms for incorporating diverse visitor responses. But in addition to such techniques, which provide a relatively small space for visitor choices, imagine: a gallery with the explicit goal of fostering the sharing and exchange of various perspectives on objects: an exhibit that makes equal room for other "interpreters" by giving visitors space and materials to create and add labels and other devices for communicating their interpretations to others, including suggestions to others on how to relate to the object as they do: a museum program that begins, as Frisch suggested, with audience members' multiple interpretations of what they've seen and then challenges visitors and staff alike to truly understand each other's perspectives.

In the realm of process, or the ways in which we create exhibits and programs, we also have experience on which we can build in our efforts to create expanded dialogues. In many museums, tremendous gains have come from the difficult but rewarding work of using teams, community advisory groups, and focus groups in planning and design. It's time to explore further what such groups could look like, what purposes they could serve, and how they would operate. How about casting our nets wider than staff and community membership and involving individuals who make meaning of objects in many different ways? How about, as Thelen suggests for history, convening a group to discuss the vast "meaning of things," in which teachers, collectors, shamans, the elderly, anthropologists, shopkeepers, museum educators, children, and others would discuss and negotiate the content of an exhibit and, in the process, construct new experiences with objects?[13]

What might the outcome be? While it's hard to know in advance, negotiation specialists suggest that shared authority for a group goal is likely to produce common ground.[14] Could museum exhibits and programs find such common ground? The popularity of Fred Wilson's exhibits suggests so. While largely the vision of one individual, Wilson's unique installations suggest the great potential museums have to be places that can transcend differences as well as communicate about them. As Donald Garfield describes Wilson's philosophy, "The key element for Wilson is to let the *shared humanity* of the museum, its collections, and visitors come through." As Wilson explains:

> Even the most standard exhibition can be more human. Because you are human. The people who organize exhibitions are human. If they . . . tap into what led them to get excited about museums in the first place, and put THAT out there along with the scholarship, that is how to reach people.[15]

While individual artists or museum educators may well possess the sensitivity and skill to hypothesize what constitutes "shared humanity," imagine the challenge and potential rewards of seeking answers to that question through broad dialogues among diverse groups. And imagine developing exhibits and programs that reflect those answers as well as the processes involved in finding them!

On the Role of the Museum Educator

What new or revised skills do we need to accomplish these goals? How might we rethink the role of the museum educator as a result? While the field of history has not yet imparted much advice in this realm, the paradigm itself suggests two major avenues for broadening our notion of the role of the museum educator: to be one who is knowledgeable in the ways people make meaning of objects and to have the skills needed to facilitate dialogue and negotiation.

As we move from a model of the museum professional as exclusively a one-way expert communicator to one who participates and facilitates in shared processes of meaning-making, these needs become clear. While subject matter knowledge, excellent interpretive abilities, and the ability to communicate information clearly and effectively are and will always be necessary skills for museum educators, we will increasingly need to understand the diverse ways that people make meaning of objects if we hope to support these perspectives effectively. While the field of museum visitor studies offers great insights and new developments, we must also look toward research and observations on the role of objects in our lives from psychologists, folklorists, artists, religious leaders, anthropologists, poets, collectors, historians, novelists, and our friends, relatives, children, and selves. What more could museums do and be?

To truly support, encourage, and promote dialogues in museums, museum educators (and others) must also hone our skills as *facilitators*—learning and improving in the areas of listening, supporting, prodding, and negotiating—skills that grow increasingly vital to the functioning of a multicultural society. Many of these skills have long been the hallmark of a good educator in any context; yet focused on communicating the "museum's message," we may have lost sight of their importance. In this area, too, we may look to literature on conflict resolution, therapy, counseling, and management as well as to firsthand experience and experimentation, for guidance and inspiration.

To preserve differences, to facilitate mutual respect, and to forge the discovery of "shared humanity" are tremen-

dous challenges that face the field of history—and nearly every other realm of our society today. What better place to uphold these goals and model paths to their accomplishment than museums, the places that house objects of so many different meanings?

NOTES

1. *Journal of American History* 75, no.4 (1989): entire issue.

2. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

3. Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 223, 228.

4. David Thelen, "History-Making in America," *Historian* 53, no. 4 (1991): 631.

5. Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Tamar Katriel and Thomas Farrell, "Scrapbooks as Cultural Texts: An American Art of Memory," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1991): 1–17.

6. Thelen, "History-Making in America."

7. David Glassberg, "'Dear Ken Burns': Letters to a Filmmaker," *Mosaic* 1, no. 3 (1991): 8.

8. Lois Silverman, "'Of Us and Other 'Things': The Content and Functions of Talk by Adult Visitor Pairs in an Art and a History Museum" (Ph.D diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1990).

9. Christopher Musello, "Family Houses and Personal Identity" (Ph.D. diss., Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 1986), p. 388.

10. Thelen, "History-Making in America."

11. Frisch, *Shared Authority*, p. 190.

12. Thelen, "History-Making in America," p. 648.

13. Ibid. See also Mihali Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

14. Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

15. Donald Garfield, "Making the Museum Mine: An Interview with Fred Wilson," *Museum News* 72, no. 3 (May/June 1993): 49, including quotation from Fred Wilson.

Redefining Modernism

Ideal Homes *at London's Design Museum*

DEBORAH SUGG

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> Vomit-coloured rugs, machines to cut eggs into cubes, Chinese teddy bears with extra-round eyes, and £6,000 computer-operated "home organs." . . . It's a tradition of the design world to mock this annual entertainment for its silly gadgets and pervasive tackiness. But after this year's visit, I'm not sure it's funny any more. With four million unemployed, and a good deal more hungry or badly housed, this ghastly consumerist con-trick—the ideal home lifestyle—grates more than usual.[1]

This 1987 review by design critic John Thackara displays modernist assumptions and prejudices about the London *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition. Since 1908, this annual trade fair has been a major influence on public taste in all matters that make a house a home. Today the exhibition prompts anxieties about consumerism, social aspirations, and "bad taste." Filled with wacky gadgets whose form certainly does not follow function, it is the antithesis of Good Design. The innocent utopian dreams of the years between the world wars—dreams of a technological future and mass home ownership—seem to have turned into nightmares.

Critics have denigrated the Ideal Home Exhibition for its failure to endorse modernist ideals and for its appeal to the consumerist desires of its predominantly lower-middle-class audience as they engage in the "feminine" activity of shopping. The "ideal home lifestyle" that Thackara refers to is lower-middle-class taste, and the "silly gadgets" and "pervasive tackiness" are a set of social aspirations toward a particular modernity and a common culture. In calling consumerism a "con-trick," he implies that people are duped into consuming. But as recent work in cultural studies has shown, the act of consumption is often knowing and expert. Consumption is a pleasurable leisure pursuit and, as such, a key feature of modern mass culture.

In 1992 I organized a retrospective of the Ideal Home Exhibition for the Design Museum in London. Founded in 1990 by Terence Conran, guru of Good Design and purveyor of Good Taste to the masses, the museum displays 20th-century mass-produced design in a 1950s warehouse by the River Thames remodeled in the International Style of the 1930s. Until recently it has tended