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2 Heritage Museums and the 3 Public

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8 Introduction

9 Museums are public institutions. The American
10 Alliance of Museums Code of Ethics states that
11 “for museums, public service is paramount.” But
12 there is continuing and useful debate about how
13 public service – indeed how the public – should be
14 defined; what the public might require, demand,
15 or need; and what the museum might offer. How
16 might museums balance the needs of general and
17 specific publics? How should museums balance
18 their responsibility to the immediate needs of the
19 public today and those of future publics?

20 Museums have long been public institutions,
21 but the nature of their interaction with the public
22 has changed. Victorian museums often aimed at
23 “edifying” the masses. In the early twentieth cen-
24 tury, many museums saw their role as providing
25 training for citizenship. Exposure to the best that
26 civilization had to offer, the thought went, would
27 improve museum visitors, making them better
28 people and better citizens. Toward the end of the
29 twentieth century, many museums aimed to edu-
30 cate and inspire the public and to work toward

democracy and social justice. In the words of 31
museum theorist Stephen Weil (1999), museums 32
moved “from being about something to being for 33
somebody.” 34

Current Debates 35

Over the past few decades, the role of the public in 36
heritage museums has changed dramatically. 37
Members of the public or the publics – many 38
museums now prefer to use the plural to acknowl- 39
edge the diversity of participants in their 40
communities – have gone from being *visitors*, 41
passive recipients of the wisdom of the curators 42
to *participants* in museum processes and have 43
become increasingly central to the ongoing work 44
of the museum. Many museums – though by no 45
means all – have begun to share authority with the 46
public. 47

This has happened in three ways. Many heri- 48
tage museums have invited source communities to 49
participate in the curation of collections and exhi- 50
bitions, giving them a measure of control over the 51
aspects of the museum related to them. Funders 52
looking for results from their support have 53
insisted museums measure the outcome of their 54
work, to show how they have changed the visiting 55
public. And, in what has been called Museum 2.0, 56
museums are increasingly allowing visitors to 57
co-curate collections and exhibitions, part of a 58
more general rise in participatory culture. 59

60 The reasons for these changes are social, cultural, and technological. Aboriginal peoples have
 61 gained new political and cultural authority. New public funding sources have demanded that
 62 museums consider public outcomes of their work. The rise of a postmodern museology that
 63 encourages multiple points of view and decenters authority, part of a larger cultural change that has
 64 shifted authority from experts to participants, is key. So too is the rising importance of education
 65 as the goal of museums and the concomitant rise of evaluation, making reception of the message as
 66 important as transmission. Finally, new technologies, especially Web 2.0, have made it much easier
 67 for the public to participate in museum exhibits and have raised the expectation of participation as
 68 a norm of cultural experience.

69 Heritage museums with indigenous collections have seen the most dramatic changes in their
 70 public role. Stating in the 1970s, as part of a postcolonial rise in communities demanding control
 71 of their history and future, many source communities for museum collections protested the way
 72 their objects were displayed and the way their stories were told. Heritage museums, they
 73 noted, were agents of colonialism and deculturation and needed to be redefined for a
 74 postcolonial era to be “decolonized.” Repatriation, the creation of culturally specific museums,
 75 and a new role for these publics in heritage museums reshaped museum culture.

76 Indigenous peoples around the world, and especially in the United States, Canada,
 77 Australia, and New Zealand, gained increased control of the stories museums told about them.
 78 In the United States, Native Americans wrested some collections away from museums, a policy
 79 written into law by the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990. The National
 80 Museum of the American Indian (1989) put Native concerns central to its mission; it “works
 81 in collaboration with the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere to protect and foster their
 82 cultures by reaffirming traditions and beliefs, encouraging contemporary artistic expression,
 83 and empowering the Indian voice.” In New Zealand, a policy of biculturalism gave
 84 Maori a formally recognized stake in the display

108 of not only cultural materials but also historical paintings that showed their ancestors
 109 (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2012). The rise of ethnically specific museums in the 1980s, for example,
 110 the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, in Seattle, and the Japanese
 111 American National Museum, in Los Angeles, shows the increased role that specific publics
 112 play in heritage museums. These museums preserve and tell a community’s story by and for that
 113 community.

114 The general audience for museums has also come to play a larger role in the work of museums.
 115 Part of a widespread rise in participatory culture, many heritage museums now consider their public
 116 audiences as the central factor in collecting, research, and display, where they might once
 117 have put collections, or research, in that place. A focus on the importance of the audience’s
 118 needs and interests was rare, but not unknown, in the early twentieth century. For example, John
 119 Cotton Dana, director of the Newark Museum, emphasized the importance of allowing local
 120 communities to help shape the collections of museums and the stories told about them. “Learn
 121 what aid the community needs: fit the museum to those needs,” he wrote (Dana 1917).

122 This focus on the importance of the public as audience became common in museums in the
 123 1980s and 1990s. Increased dependence on federal and foundation funding and an increased
 124 demand by funders for evaluation of the results of their funding played a key part. Museums
 125 moved from considering *intent* of their programs (what did they claim to do?) to *output* (what did
 126 they produce?) and to *outcomes* (what change did they produce in their audiences?). This change,
 127 following similar changes in social services and then education, meant that audiences were central
 128 to funding and thus to mission.

129 Related to this is the rise to prominence in many museums of museum educators. “Audience
 130 advocates,” as some educators called themselves, were responsible for seeing that exhibitions
 131 worked for an increasingly diverse audience. Evaluation became central to exhibitions, with
 132 questionnaires, focus groups, and other survey instruments becoming a part of the process of

- 156 exhibitions in many museums. Front-end evaluation
 157 helps shape ideas for exhibits, based on public
 158 interests and knowledge; formative evaluation
 159 helps to shape exhibition concepts and techniques;
 160 and remedial and summative evaluation helps to suggest
 161 improvements or to show funders that exhibitions had
 162 the desired outcome. Together, these kinds of evaluations
 163 bring the public's voice into the processes of museum
 164 work in significant ways.
- 166 The third trend in the increasing role of the public
 167 in the heritage museum is the rise of audience
 168 participation in museum work. This trend, part of a
 169 more general participatory culture, is sometimes called
 170 Museum 2.0 (the term, coined by museum consultant
 171 Nina Simon, is derived from Web 2.0, the increased
 172 participation, collaboration, and interoperability that
 173 became common on the World Wide Web starting in
 174 about 2004). It is a part of more general trends in
 175 public engagement noted above but includes a more
 176 profound sharing of authority with the public.
- 178 Like Web 2.0, Museum 2.0 embraces the idea
 179 of a two-way interchange and the blurring of lines
 180 between authors and readers or curators and exhibit
 181 audiences (Simon 2010). While visitors have always
 182 been cocreators of meaning, interpreting exhibitions
 183 based not only on the intent of curators but also
 184 based on their own interests and knowledge, museums
 185 have increasingly recognized this, allowing visitors
 186 to suggest collections for acquisition, choose objects
 187 for display, display their own collections in museums,
 188 "tag" collections both online and in the museum,
 189 and add their own labels to exhibitions, among
 190 other experiments. 191
- Future Directions** 192
- The notion that the museum is fundamentally for
 193 the public that use it and should be shaped to their
 194 needs and desires – rather than about museum staff
 195 expertise, collections, or research – remains a
 196 contested one. The contest of ideas about the role
 197 of the public in museums and the compromises and
 198 synergies that it promotes provides for some of
 199 the most exciting opportunities in museum work
 200 today. 201
- Cross-References** 202
- ▶ [Cultural Heritage and the Public](#) 203
 - ▶ [Museums and Memory Experiences](#) 204
 - ▶ [Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage](#) 205
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