

Reflection Paper

Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Certificate

Before starting the certificate program, I wrote down my objectives for what I hoped to learn. Those goals were not only fulfilled, but exceeded. Not only did I learn about how museums are changing and how many types of museums exist, but the certificate also provided opportunities to learn about many different facets of museum scholarship. I started the program with the hope of gaining a strong knowledge base and skillset to work in a museum in different capacities. The scholarship we studied, the museums we visited, and the practicum all gave me the exposure to the varied theories in museum scholarship and types of museums that I had hoped for.

The first two classes were the perfect complement to one another. The first one, at the Smithsonian Institution, gave us an introduction to a large institution that has to work within complex bureaucratic systems and convey messages to an international audience. Discussions often centered around the issues of politics and power. We examined questions of memory, authority, and representation. The second class, the Museum Research Seminar, gave us the opportunity to visit an assortment of small museums near campus. While we disseminated many of the topics discussed in the class at the Smithsonian, we also focused on issues that strongly impact smaller museums, such as public engagement and community. Interesting questions about responsibility, the role of technology, and concepts of time, history, culture, and the past were also raised. We grappled with ideas surrounding the purpose and mission of museums and who they serve in today's society. I began the certificate program interested in community engagement and how museums sustain themselves today, so the first two classes in the certificate

sequence helped me explore and analyze these ideas further. These two classes set up a foundation of critical theory in museology on which I based my proposal for the practicum, the third component of the certificate program (see Appendix A).

I did my practicum at the Sandy Spring Museum, a small museum in Sandy Spring, Maryland in the suburbs of Washington D.C. Under the tutelage of the Collections Manager, I put together a finding aid for the first 50 years of minutes for the Mutual Improvement Association (see Appendix B). The Mutual Improvement Association is a women's group that has been meeting monthly since 1857 with the mission to improve their own minds and the minds of the people around them. This mission meant that the topics discussed at the meetings were incredibly varied, not only reflecting the current times, but also the values and the progressiveness of these women in Sandy Spring.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of working at the Sandy Spring Museum was to witness how the staff and the Board have chosen to convey the institution to the community. For many years, the museum was solely a history museum. As a lifelong member of the community, I have seen the museum transform from a history museum to a community (or cultural) center in the past several years. For me, the history of the area is very meaningful, as I have a personal connection with it being from a family that has deep roots in the area. However, the longevity of the museum depends on it remaining current and relevant to the community as it changes. I had several meetings with the Executive Director to discuss the project as well as the museum in general. She is extremely focused on bringing the community together. Her method of keeping the museum relevant was to evolve it into a cultural arts center where the community can come together. To do so, she has been focusing heavily on diverse programming for many different

ages. Her ideas led me to ponder questions such as what is the purpose of museums today?
Should they be more like cultural community center?

The Executive Director of the Sandy Spring Museum openly admits that they are currently not doing much with the amazing collection that they have, as so much focus has been put on programming and holding events that focus on the “now” and not so much the “past.” We discussed ways that we could incorporate the incredible history of the Mutual Improvement Association into a program that would connect with more than just descendants. The group will celebrate its 160th anniversary this May, so the hope is to hold an Association meeting at the museum. But instead of being a typical meeting, it would be open to any woman in the community who wishes to attend. They would be invited to participate actively. The history of the group would be shared, but a normal meeting where people share would also occur.

The second way that we hope to connect the history with the present community is to hold a panel discussion about the history of the Association at the yearly membership meeting in September. I would be the moderator and a couple members would be on the panel. This has been done with other clubs in the community, and was well received. Our discussions during my meetings with the Executive Director gave me a glimpse into the complexity of putting together successful programs. There are many other clubs in the community and the hope is that by doing these programs with the Association, other clubs may be interested in sharing their history and longevity with the broader community through a public event.

My experience at the museum putting together the finding aid gave me a chance also to witness the day-to-day of managing collections (and volunteers) at a small museum. I am not sure exactly how many groups use the collections for research, but I know that it is a goal of the museum staff to connect the collections with school groups and other researchers. The previous

Collections Manager asked me to create the finding aid as an example for other interns to follow and the new Collections Manager who I ended up working with supported her mission of connecting the collections with the public through useful tools like finding aids.

School groups, groups from retirement homes, and individual visitors (one of whom was doing research for a book) would come through while I was working. Many of them would browse the shelves, pulling off titles that interested them. In the case of the school groups, depending on the age group and what they were studying, the Collections Manager would give a talk highlighting different objects within the collection. Representatives from schools also contact the museum to see what aspects of the collection they could use to give students experience using primary sources. The minutes would be a great resource for students. The finding aid gives teachers and students an overview of what is in the minutes and could be used as a standalone document or as a guide to help students conduct a targeted search through the minutes. While I am not sure how many individual researchers or students from universities are using the collections, I believe that the finding aid can serve as an example for other finding aids. Then those finding aids could be published online to help bring attention to the museum and its collections.

Working in the library with the collections also made me wonder, as the museum moves away from identifying itself as a history museum, where do the archives and its collections fit into the bigger mission of the museum? In a reading by Lois Marie Fink, she stated that “the current trend of museums to function as popular entertainment has diminished the use of institutional archives, while scholarship based entirely on secondary sources has come to be common practice” (Fink, 300). Sandy Spring Museum seems to embody this statement as other parts of the museum bustle with people visiting resident artists and participating in workshops,

while the archives remains quiet. What should be the focus of archives for the future? Fink argues that it is a collection of things that assist scholarly pursuits, with a future-oriented focus. But how can that goal be expanded to also keep with the larger mission of the museum? There will always be a group of people who are interested in history, but what about reaching a broader audience? These questions, influenced by literature we read in class, came from my experience at the Sandy Spring Museum, as well as some of the field trips we took to other small museums as part of the Museum Research Seminar. The practicum played a large role in guiding my thoughts and queries regarding museums today

In our research seminar, we discussed “tactical museologies.” One point that really hit home was the idea that museums, particularly small, alternative, and/or community-based ones, have had to employ certain tactics to navigate the complex tensions and frictions that arise from conflicting demands of different stakeholders. These tactics are working toward “actively redefining the notion of heritage in opposition to the practice of tourism, serving the communities rather than voyeurs” (Buntix and Karp, 217). Community museums dance a complicated dance as they struggle to define who is their community, what is their purpose, what message should be conveyed, and who exactly they serve. Issues surrounding authority and authenticity often arise, as each person experiences a different world and thus has different interpretations. In addition, museums have to work within the constraints of funding and under the direction of a Board of Directors, as well as meet the demands of a variety of stakeholders. It is definitely not an easy job.

Whether big or small, museums face an interesting and complicated future, one that is definitely challenging, but also full of many opportunities as our world changes and technology brings us closer together. Unlike other certificates in museum studies, focusing on scholarship

and theory pushes us to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. We are encouraged to ask hard questions, even if a concrete set of answers does not exist. As a future museum professional, the immersive opportunity that the certificate program provides has laid a strong foundation for thinking through complex issues and increased awareness of larger issues within the museum world.

Works Cited

Buntix, Gustavo and Ivan Karp. "Tactical Museologies." In *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratzm Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. Pages 208-218. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Fink, Lois Marie Fink. "Museum Archives as Resources for Scholarly Research and Institutional Identity." In *New Museum Theory and Practice*, ed. Janet Marstine. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.