

“A Museum's Bygone Era,” reply to Pete Daniel’s “History with Boundaries: How Donors Shape Museum Exhibits”

Steven Lubar

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To the editor,

I read with interest, and a sense of déjà vu, Pete Daniels’ column on the problems he sees at the NMAH. Déjà vu, in part, because as a long-time colleague of Pete’s, I’ve heard him tell these stories before, many times. But déjà vu, more importantly, because there’s not much new here: This is a plea for an antiquated model of history museum.

While there is much that is valid in Pete’s concerns about the museum—the staff is shrinking, the Smithsonian leadership has led poorly—I worry that Pete has constructed a Golden Age of the museum that never was, and which never worked very well.

Here’s his Golden Age model, which segues into a plea for the future:

Curators conceptualized exhibits and had responsibility for scope and content. Unlike a lone historian writing a monograph, a curator headed a museum exhibit team that consulted with academic historians, chose objects that fit the story, explored how best to present relevant public programs, created a dynamic design, and produced a legible script that neither offended experts nor confused eighth graders. Museum practice demands that curators maintain responsibility for all these elements.

While he acknowledges it’s not quite the same as “a lone historian writing a monograph,” a bit further on, we’re treated to his “dream” of an exhibit based on his book and his shock that a farm implements dealer wouldn’t write him a check to do it.

Pete rues that the federal money that once financed exhibits is gone—though the notion that federal funding would provide the support for the “controversial interpretation” he yearns for may strike some as unlikely—but doesn’t want to accept private funding, either. The end result is fewer exhibitions, and perhaps as a result, fewer curators and other staff and, eventually, fewer visitors. That’s a real worry.

The most recent curatorial success Pete points to is the staff’s killing of an exhibit, on “achievers,” that had money behind it. It’s sad that it’s not one of the popular or daring shows of the last decade that Pete sees as a model, but rather the rejection of funds to do what could have been an interesting and popular exhibition – an episode

that historian Patty Limerick, who was involved in the exhibit, called “a shame.” Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, she noted that many journalists “took the easy formula, left over from the culture wars, and cast a much more complicated situation in tired old terms.”

I fear that this is what Pete Daniel has done in his column. The curator-as-king model that Pete remembers fondly was never very successful, and in many museums it’s been replaced by a much more interesting, if more complicated, approach that involves not only curators and academics but also educators, the public, and yes, even donors, as stake-holders in shaping interactive learning experiences that are very different than the academic books and articles so appealing to scholars-turned-curators. A good exhibition will include many points of views, raise questions rather than lecture, let its subjects speak for themselves, and provide an opportunity for visitor participation. It may not necessarily address the cutting-edge scholarship that wins points for academics but which doesn’t suit a general audience that is not privy to ongoing academic debate.

Curatorial work has changed, and that’s a good thing. The NMAH needs to change too, seizing opportunities to move on from the “conservative” curatorial practice that Pete so fondly remembers, and which too often means no exhibits at all, to a new curatorial style that acknowledges a more complicated, more inclusive, and more interesting, world of history teaching and learning.

Sincerely,

Steven Lubar

Steven Lubar is professor in the departments of American Civilization and History and director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University.