Grappling with Difficult and Undertold Stories in Exhibits

Presenter: Erin McCollum
June 15, 2017

Plan for the Hour

• Define “difficult” and “undertold” stories.
• Explore what makes these stories so difficult.
• Look at case studies of how others have presented difficult stories in exhibits.
Definitions

Difficult stories:
• are “…histories of oppression, violence, and trauma”
• “…describe memories of pain, suffering, oppression, and grief…”

and they are undertold because they:
• they evoke strong emotions
• incite “anxiety, resistance, and stress for their audiences”

Examples of Difficult and Undertold Stories

• Enslavement of African Americans
• Treatment of the mentally ill
• Internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II
• Treatment of those with Hansen’s disease (leprosy)
• Discrimination against members of LGBTQ community

Examples of Difficult & Undertold Stories

Veterans who don’t fit the model of the “hero” who returned “whole”
Women on the front lines
People of color
Conscientious objectors who were marginalized
German Americans who faced discrimination
Why Are These Stories So Difficult?

These stories are difficult – evoking strong emotions and creating anxiety, stress, and resistance – because they challenge our core beliefs about the world, society, history, and, by extension, ourselves.

That creates a crisis moment where the audience has to decide between two options:

1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything
   OR
2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo

Adapted from Julie Rose, Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites (London: Ashgate & Longman, 2016)

Difficult Stories in Action

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what’s about to tell you,” http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

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Difficult Stories in Action

What

if I told you George Washington had another set of false teeth?

What if I told you this other set wasn’t made from wood, ivory, or any of the aforementioned materials

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you,”
http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Difficult Stories in Action

What if I told you it was made from the teeth of slaves?

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you,”
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- People of color
- Conscientious objectors who were marginalized
- German Americans who faced discrimination

Navigating the Crisis Moment

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Put a Face (and a Name) On It

One Hundred Stories, Monash University, http://future.arts.monash.edu/onehundredstories/
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Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Israel)

Yizkor Book, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Israel)
Put a Face (and a Name) On It

Yav Hameth, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Israel)

Signals to Visitors – Transition Spaces

National World War I Museum & Memorial; Photo: Ralph Applebaum Associates

Signals to Visitors – Transition Spaces

National World War I Museum & Memorial; Photo: Ralph Applebaum Associates
Signals to Visitors – Warning Signs

![Image: Warning sign from the National Museum of African American History and Culture]

http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/price-of-freedom

Open Floorplan

![Diagram: Open, direct, radial plans]

Reflection Spaces

"On the Texas Homefront," Bullock Texas State History Museum

Reflection Spaces

"On the Texas Homefront," Bullock Texas State History Museum

Reflection Spaces

"The Enclave," Portland Art Museum
Reflection Spaces

"The Enclave," Portland Art Museum

Contact Information

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