TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

Thinking Through Culture: Six Practical Steps to Addressing Race in Museums

Welcome!

The webinar will begin at 10:00 a.m. CT.

While you wait:

1. Download PDFs of the slides and handout under the “Handouts” tab of your control bar.

2. Confirm that your speakers are turned on and your audio is working by doing a sound check in the “Audio” tab of the control bar. Having problems? Exit and restart the webinar, or switch to “phone call” for a phone number and access code to hear the audio through your telephone.

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Museum Services

The Museum Services Program provides support, resources, and training to museums in Texas.

- Consultations
- Webinars and workshops
- Resources

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Museum Services

www.thc.texas.gov/museum-services

On our webpage:

- Webinars
- Workshops
- Grants and Fundraising
- Helpful Resources
- Connect and Learn

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Upcoming Free Museum Services Webinar

www.thc.texas.gov/museumwebinars

- Managing the Endless Social Media Cycle: Must-Haves and Strategies
  - Tuesday, November 10, 10:00 a.m. CT
- Friends in High Places: Navigating Friends Group Partnerships
  - Tuesday, December 8, 2:00 p.m.

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Development Workshop Series

www.thcfriends.org

- Elements of Successful Philanthropy: Building a Comprehensive and Sustainable Development Program for Your Organization
  - Thursday, November 12
  - Friday, November 13
  - Thursday, November 19
  - Friday, November 20

  - Early bird registration (closes Friday, 10/23): $169
  - Full registration: $189
  - Single session: $59

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Upcoming Free Webinars from Other Orgs

www.thc.texas.gov/museumconnections

- *COVID-19 Research and REALM Project Update*, Oct. 22, 1:00 p.m. CT, ALA
- *The Future of the Blockbuster: A Need for Change?*, Oct. 22, 1:00 p.m. CT, AAH
- *Museums are Not Neutral*, Oct. 22, 6:00 p.m. CT, ISM
- *Virtual Programs: Making Meaningful Connections*, Oct. 23, 11:00 a.m. CT, MANY
- *Updating New Solutions for House Museums: Lessons Learned*, Oct. 28, 11:00 a.m. CT, NEMA
- *Making the Future Museum We Want*, Oct. 28, 2:00 p.m. CT, MSN
- *Effective and Equitable Community Engagement: Collaborating with Integrity and Reciprocity*, Oct. 29, 2:00 p.m. CT, CCLI
- *Engaging People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities in Virtual Programs*, Oct. 29, 2:00 p.m. CT, CCAC
- *Nightmare at the Museum*, Oct. 29, 6:00 p.m. CT, AAMI
- *Essential Work in the Cultural Field: Housing Access*, Oct. 30, 11:00 a.m. CT, MANY

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Aaron Ambroso

Thinking Through Culture: Six Practical Steps to Addressing Race within Museums

Aaron Ambroso

Who am I?

Received my Masters in Art history from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2018

Worked in the education departments of the Nasher Museum of Art, the North Carolina Museum of Art, and now the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Why it’s important to foreground the speaking subject

Foregrounding one’s social position forces us reject neutrality and disinterestedness.

What perspective is being told?

Poll

How do you see issues of race and/or diversity most affecting your museum or institution?

- a.) Equal representation in staffing
- b.) Better connection with surrounding communities
- c.) Equal representation within the collection or exhibitions
- d.) Changing existing collection layout or interpretive material
- e.) Other (please share in the comments)

Tools to think with

Artists such as Fred Wilson and others working within "institutional critique" have taught us a lot about how power plays out in museum contexts.

Here, Wilson foregrounds the colonial history of collecting and displaying African art.

Fred Wilson, *Metalwork*, Maryland Historical Society (1992)

Fred Wilson, *Colonial Collection* (1991)

From center to periphery

Museums and places formerly at the margins are now challenging the symbolic hierarchy of margin and center.

The public is no longer thought of in abstract terms, but as a contentious and divided groups, formed through historical processes.

The U’mista Cultural Center, in Alert Bay, British Columbia.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Museums as community centers

These community centers/museums tell partial histories, with objects taking on local meanings and inflections.

To the extent that museums begin to respond to a diverse public, they begin to change their historical roots and become sites of negotiation between diverse groups.

Galeria de la Raza, San Francisco

Collections and travelers

As museums are displaced from center to periphery and as they become sites for negotiation between social and historical divides, so too do they seem less like the final resting stop for collections.

1904 photograph of Zuni war gods in New Mexico

Turbulent times or inherent problems?

When “ownership” of objects within the museum – whether that means actual ownership or more removed ownership such as representational ownership – is at stake, museums become sites of negotiation, struggle, and encounter between different groups.

Parker Bright protests Dana Schultz’s *Open Casket* (2017)

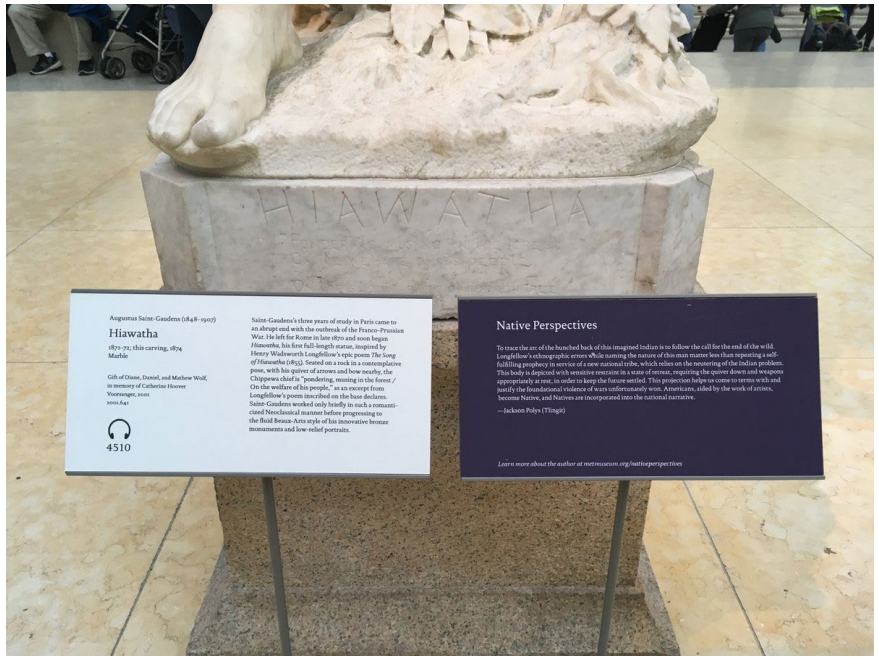
Sam Durant and the Walker Art Center

Sam Durant, *Scaffold* (2017)

The delay of Philip Guston

https://hyperallergic.simplecast.com/episodes/national-gallery-of-art-director-discusses-the-decision-to-delay-the-philip-guston-exhibition?t=19m3s

Working with communities



Communities are never monolithic. How can we create exhibit spaces that reflect more than one voice? More than one narrative? That reflect the very diversity of our communities?

Poll

How has your museum – either now or in the past – changed in order to deal with issues of race or diversity?

- a.) Worked closely with members of the community
- c.) Acquired objects to increase collection diversity
- d.) Hired more diverse staff members
- e.) Changed collection interpretive materials
- f.) Other (please share in the comments)

A crisis of expertise

Who has “ownership” over an image or an object?

What kinds of experience or expertise are relevant to managing and displaying a collection of, for example, African art?

Mixing up the narrative

Museums a heir to powerful histories in both art and anthropology of seeing cultures as separate, organized entities. *Yet travel, mixing, and borrowing is the rule of cultural history, not the exception.*

Soldiers in the aftermath of Benin expedition.

Objects are travelers, following routes across the world in circumstances that were often colonial in nature.

In house collaborators

What if a museum updated its African art collection with an object owned by a museum guard who immigrated from the continent?

What if museum guards served as community liaisons?

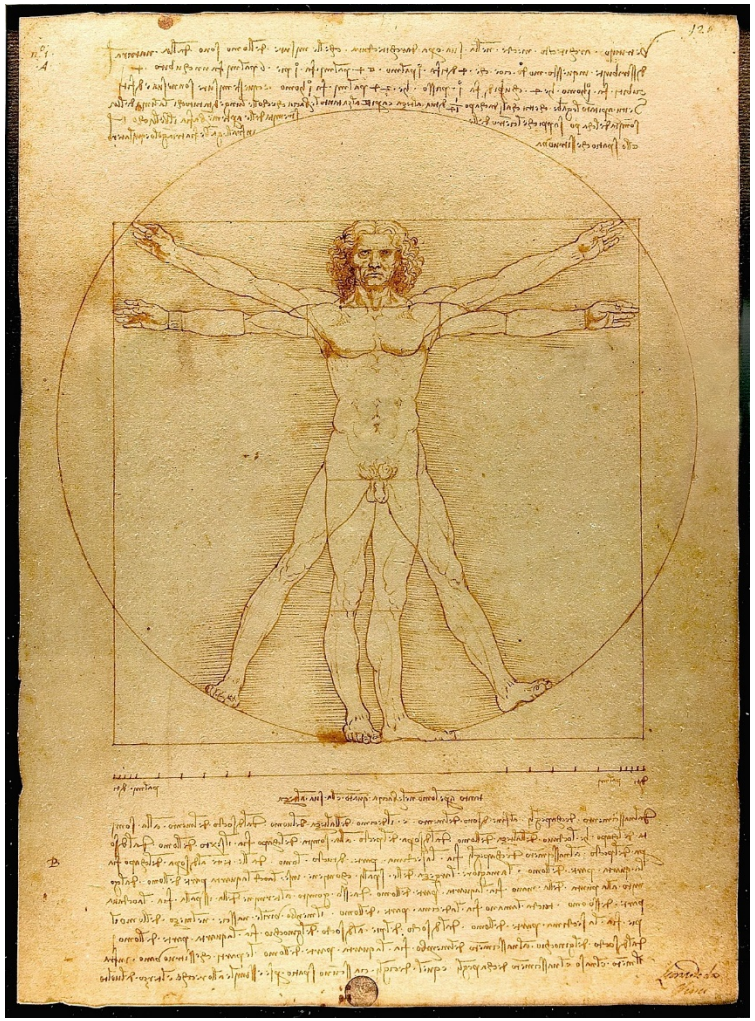
Issues of neutrality

Is it best to emphasize a 16th-century British portrait's technical and formal qualities? Or should we re-contextualize 16th-century symbolic objects, which were closely tied to the upper nobility, to better understand the historic inequality of the present?

History and Mystery at the North Carolina Museum of Art (2017)

Orienting our work: missions and overarching solutions

"As long as museums guide their initiatives in terms of abstractions and not in terms of critically looking at race, class, and gender discrimination and history, they will struggle to make the changes needed to address our crisis."



A spirit of experimentation

Change involves experimentation!

There's no line between interpretation and non-interpretation. Every display, no matter how elementary, involves choices and decisions, i.e. interpretations.

Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum* (1993)

Q & A

Please also feel free to reach out with any questions for me at aambroso@mfah.org.

1902, The Palace of Fine Arts, now the St. Louis Museum of Art