

# Museums and the Public: Doing History Together

Thomas A. Woods

---

Revisionist history has been a standard practice in American history for years. It is striking that it has taken "The West As America" and the aborted *Enola Gay* exhibit, two recent Smithsonian Institution exhibitions with revisionist themes, to stimulate a national conversation about interpretations of the past and the way we do history in public. Why did a national controversy erupt over two contested museum exhibits and not over revisionist historical monographs? Is the stormy public reaction to these exhibits sufficient cause to withdraw into the alluring security of an insular academic freedom? Should we panic over the reaction, or should we celebrate because the public cares about their history and our interpretations of it?

History has always been pragmatic in the sense that historians revise and rewrite constantly to meet their own needs and the needs of a new generation. Nor is the idea of doing history with the public and for the public new. In 1932, Carl Becker delivered his famous presidential address, "Everyman His Own Historian," to the American Historical Association. Influenced by the cultural ennui of the deepening depression, Becker called for a popular history that would engage a broad audience and provide a sense of meaning and identity, a "living history," not one "that lies inert in unread books" and "does no work in the world." Long before it was fashionable, Becker acknowledged that history was selective, personal, and pragmatic: it was "an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical and emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic taste."<sup>1</sup>

The loss of the understanding that history has a pragmatic and public role has contributed to the malaise of academic historians. Over the last decade, many scholars have been troubled by the increasing fragmentation of their field and their consequent isolation from each other and a public audience. Comments from historians collected through surveys in 1986 and 1994 by the *Journal of American*

Thomas A. Woods is director of Old World Wisconsin in Eagle, Wisconsin.

<sup>1</sup> Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review*, 37 (Jan. 1932), 234, 228. For a "perspectivistic" approach to the past, rather than Becker's relativism, see Thomas A. Woods, "Varying Versions of the Real: Toward a Socially Responsible Public History," *Minnesota History*, 51 (Spring 1989), 178-85; and Thomas A. Woods, "Getting beyond the Criticism of History Museums: A Model for Interpretation," *Public Historian*, 12 (Summer 1990), 77-90.

*History* tell the tale. One wrote in 1986: "Our field has too many books that ought to have been articles, and too many articles that ought to have been footnotes." In spite of an expressed desire for public relevance, the academic history profession does not reward those who strive for more inclusive approaches. One historian noted that "those who take broad perspectives and try to inform the largest public are scorned."<sup>2</sup>

There is ample reason for concern. For the academic historian, the most important product is a scholarly monograph, but few historical monographs exceed the usual initial printing of fifteen hundred copies, and the audience consists primarily of colleagues and a few students. At the same time, the public audience for museums and historic sites is growing. Approximately one hundred million people visit museums in the United States each year. As Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig noted in 1989, "the 350,000 visitors to Plimoth Plantation probably exceed the cumulative readership of all the new scholarly works in colonial history in a typical year."<sup>3</sup>

Why is it that as the public appetite for history grows, the audience for academic historical productions shrinks or remains stagnant? The answer lies partly in the differing attitudes that academic historians, museum historians, and the public bring to the making of history and in their different approaches to learning. Using the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality charting instrument that measures such things as how people make decisions and how they order their lives, researchers took a random sample of the American populace and of college faculty and discovered that 76 percent of the public sample "tended to place more weight on their own direct experience in making sense of the world than on abstract reasoning. The opposite was true for seventy-six percent of a sample of college faculty."<sup>4</sup>

These results suggest that the academic community has difficulty attracting a large public audience because academic historians approach history differently than the public. The historian James Miller notes, "the mistake most of us academics make is *starting* with theory rather than experience. . . . A better approach may be to get people's attention using a more experience-based approach and then building on that base to introduce analytical concepts." Other psychologists and educational theorists, such as David A. Kolb and Bernice McCarthy, agree. Although the public has a variety of learning styles, beginning concretely and experientially is the best way to appeal to a broad general audience.<sup>5</sup>

By examining how audiences learn, how they reflect the diversity in American society, and what they seek from contact with history, historians based in museums

<sup>2</sup> David Thelen, "The Profession and the *Journal of American History*," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986), 9; David Thelen, "The Practice of American History," *ibid.*, 81 (Dec. 1994), 939.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana, 1989), xii.

<sup>4</sup> James Miller, "Museums and the Academy: Toward Building an Alliance," *Journal of American Culture*, 12 (Summer 1989), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; David A. Kolb, Irwin M. Rubin, and James M. McIntyre, *Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach* (Englewood Cliffs, 1979); Bernice McCarthy, *The 4MAT System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Techniques* (Oak Brook, Ill., 1981).

are developing new ways of working with the public. We have recognized that the public has significant interests and perspectives that should shape history exhibits and programs. Community advisory groups, a particularly important innovation, have been organized to provide input on what community members think is significant about their past, what they are interested in exploring further, and how they interpret their past. The advisory group members tell us why they care about history, why they come to museums, and what formats will draw their communities to our exhibits. As a result, exhibitions and programs form part of a dialogue, constantly circling from the museum historian to the public audience and back to create an inclusive museum community. They are a community experience with both intellectual and affective aspects. Exhibitions developed this way contain many different perspectives, and so they can be enjoyed by the broadest possible group of people. Public history becomes history done with the public, for the public, and in public.

The furor of public criticism and academic response over the exhibit "The West As America," mounted at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art in 1991, and the more recent *Enola Gay* controversy at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) have led some to question whether significant scholarship and social criticism can be conveyed through public history presentations. But perhaps "The West As America" defeated its own goals by using an academic approach to history—presenting an authoritative, master narrative—rather than the new methods of perspectivist history and an audience-sensitive exhibit methodology. Applying the work of historians such as Richard Slotkin to painted images of the West, "The West As America" challenged the Frederick Jackson Turner thesis, still popular among the public, that the experience of the West defined the United States as a land of heroic adventure and opportunity. In the introductory wall panel, curators announced that the public image of the West, created in part by such popular artists as Frederick Remington, George Caleb Bingham, and Thomas Cole, "should not be seen as a record of time and place. More often than not, they are contrived views, meant to answer the hopes and desires of people facing a seemingly unlimited and mostly unsettled portion of the nation." The exhibition presented a new interpretation of the paintings: the West was defined by violence, racial hatreds, gender discrimination, corporate greed, and disappointed hopes. Many visitors were outraged when they viewed the exhibit and spilled their anger onto the pages of a comment book. Daniel Boorstin added fuel to the flames when he penned his opinion, "A perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit. No credit to the Smithsonian."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For bibliographic references to this debate, see Andrew Gulliford, review of "The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 199–206; and Marie Tyler-McGraw et al., "Roundtable: Curating History in Museums," *Public Historian*, 14 (Summer 1992), 51–91. Alan Trachtenberg, "Contesting the West," *Art in America*, 79 (Sept. 1991), 122–23; Roger B. Stein, "The West as Exhibition," *Radical Historians Newsletter*, 65 (Nov. 1991), 4, 16.

Some reviewers have suggested that the exhibit was too controversial for a public audience more interested in “milk toast” than true intellectual nourishment. According to Andrew Gulliford, who reviewed the exhibit in the *Journal of American History*, “one of the many lessons learned from ‘The West As America’ is that most museum goers prefer a seamless and uncontested past devoid of controversy or recrimination. Faced with uncertainties about the future, Americans seek solace in a nostalgic past.”<sup>7</sup> Gulliford’s comments are relatively temperate. The exhibition and the debate over it have generally been antagonistic and polarizing. Defenders of the exhibit have called objectors “neoconservatives”; critics called its curators revisionists and politically correct radicals.

This discussion about political attitudes and an intellectually backward public audience misses the point. The problem with the exhibit was not that it championed a revisionist perspective about the past. Instead, the key issues are the exhibit’s academic curatorial style, methodology, and apparent lack of respect for its audience. In a roundtable discussion in the *Public Historian*, Marsha Semmel, director for public programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities, has argued that “museums provide a unique kind of experiential learning, and exhibitions are a peculiar and special genre.” She emphasized that the educational methodology was as important as the scholarly information included in exhibits: the text must be clear of “extraneous and impenetrable jargon.” She advised against berating or bludgeoning the audience, urging curators to avoid a “heavyhanded didacticism for an atmosphere of intellectual exploration, curiosity, and discovery.” Roger Stein, an art historian at the University of Virginia who liked the show’s visual impact, agreed: “verbal texts need . . . to allow viewers intellectual space both to understand on their own and to dissent from the point of view offered.”<sup>8</sup>

In counterpoint, Alfred Young, a scholar with important experience in curating museum exhibits, argued that the key issue was “simply whether William Truettner and his fellow curators had a right to their own interpretation and to implement it as they saw fit.”<sup>9</sup> But in doing public history, we seek to address a broad audience, a goal shared by many academic historians. A public audience is neither a collegial nor a captive audience. It must be intrigued and cajoled. Though curators have a right to their ideas, no one is required to listen; if academic and public historians want to have an impact on society, we want a broad public audience to listen. The curatorial approach to “The West As America” was too self-indulgent—too focused on an academic model and on what the curators wanted to say. It neglected the public audience: their defining cultural myths, the possibility of varying perspectives, why visitors come to museums, how they want to spend their time, how they learn, and how they respond to new ideas. As a result of the controversy, tour venues were canceled, and only a limited public audience viewed the exhibit.

<sup>7</sup> Gulliford, review of “The West As America,” 206.

<sup>8</sup> Marsha Semmel, “The Museum as Forum: A Funder’s View,” *Public Historian*, 14 (Summer 1992), 78, 80; Roger B. Stein, “Visualizing Conflict in *The West as America*,” *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred F. Young, “A Modest Proposal: A Bill of Rights for American Museums,” *ibid.*, 72.

The *Enola Gay* exhibit conflagration was an elaborated version of “The West As America” controversy. Since they were not formally included from the beginning of script development, veterans’ groups and others used the press and the political system to express their outrage at the challenge to their memory and the meaning of their experiences that the first script appeared to represent. It was not enough to include historians of the armed services, because they cannot represent the rank and file. Without a partnership with leaders of veterans’ groups that the advisory group could have created, the museum’s professionals had no allies other than academic historians to call upon when they were challenged.

Much has been said and written about critics’ misrepresentation of the initial script, even though virtually everyone has acknowledged that it was revisionist in its interpretation of the decision to drop the bomb and in its treatment of the impact on Japanese civilians. Much of this distrust, misinformation, and politicization might have been muted or avoided if the museum had formed a partnership with affected groups at the start of planning, much as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum did with its similarly controversial mix of memory and scholarship, commemoration and analysis. The exhibit might have avoided or survived the shoals of controversy if it had formed a partnership with community groups, understood the intensely symbolic meaning the *Enola Gay* embodied, and incorporated a thoroughly perspectivistic dialogue, allowing for dissent by showing differing versions of the bombing, its reasons and results. If these steps had been taken and the veterans and politicians still refused to allow multiple perspectives grounded in good documentary history to appear, then the academic and museum community would have to unite in protest. This proposed method is not a form of self-censorship. It does not mix the message to avoid controversy. It is simply good public history to be inclusive.

The National Air and Space Museum tried to accommodate community perspectives after the first script version became public, but it was already too late to forge a partnership. The response from the academic community was the same as for “The West As America.” Articles in the November 1994 *OAH Newsletter* and the comments from historians at the *Enola Gay* panel during the 1995 joint conference for the OAH and the National Council on Public History amounted to a declaration of cultural war and a demand for academic freedom for museum curators.

We should be encouraged by the recent controversies over public history exhibits and programs. Controversy means people are listening and that they care about history. Rather than struggling to remake museums in the image of the academy, we should think about ways to combine the strengths of the history profession in the museum and the academy. Together we can remake history in American society.