



How Exhibits Mean: Memory, History and the 1904 World's Fair

by Katharine T. Corbett

Katharine Corbett, now living in Gorham, Maine, writes and teaches St. Louis history with an emphasis on women. During her eighteen years at the Missouri Historical Society she served as Director of Education, and then as Director of Interpretation. She was responsible for the interpretation of two NEH funded exhibits: "St. Louis in the Gilded Age" and the exhibit discussed here. She may be contacted at: Ktcorbett@aol.com

Visitor meaning making may be stimulated by exhibitry that explicitly addresses the social construction of history, using personal and familial history-making as a point of connection.

Nearly ten years ago I attended a conference of museum professionals and historians at the Chicago Historical Society that bore the lofty title "Venues of Inquiry in the American City." All morning we engaged in intense discussion over competing theories of urban history and the importance of current scholarship in planning exhibits. CHS had just opened an NEH-funded exhibition on Chicago in the 1890s that exemplified the best in historical interpretation, and over the lunch break I wandered in to take a look.

Rich with artifacts and well designed, the exhibit had a clear, interpretive thrust with well-written labels supported by intriguing videos and interactives. An older woman and her middle-aged daughter were the only other people in the gallery and they were having a wonderful time. Moving from section to section, they linked familiar objects from the past to their own memories. By the time they left, the women were deep in conversation about the history of their family. Clearly the exhibit had stimulated visitor interest, but nothing I overheard referred in any way to Chicago or to the exhibit interpretation. I returned to the conference still convinced that historical exhibits should be based on the best possible scholarship, but with a heightened awareness that, regardless of our intentions, people draw their own meanings from the artifacts, text, and design elements they encounter in the gallery. What do we have to do, I wondered, to be included in the conversation visitors have with themselves and with each other in the gallery?

Historians working with other museum people to produce exhibitions have long tried, self-consciously, to balance the claims of academic rigor against the vagaries of visitor response—because both are critical. Authoritarian meaning-giving reduces history to pedantry; simple self-referential meaning making reduces history to therapy. Both extremes are intellectually and socially irresponsible. The issue, it seems to me, is not which model to adopt but how to provoke a meaningful interplay in the gallery between the otherness of the past and the urgency of the present.



In 1993 the Missouri Historical Society began planning an exhibition on the 1904 World's Fair, known officially as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Long before we started planning the exhibit, we discovered from formal and informal surveys that our local audience was eager to learn even more than they already knew about the fair. In St. Louis, the fair is the pivot point of local history; everything happened either before or after 1904. Half of St. Louisans surveyed by the exhibit team identified the World's Fair as the most important event in the city's history. We hoped they would also be receptive to an exhibit that encouraged them to challenge, analyze, and contextualize the nearly one hundred year history of the fair and not merely accept—or ignore—interpretations others sought to impose. The World's Fair exhibit provided the opportunity to try out ideas about exhibit-making, history-making, and, although we did not express it that way, meaning making. Convinced that a museum exhibition is implicitly a three-way conversation between visitors, artifacts and the exhibit team, we sought to make that interplay explicit. We set three goals for the exhibit to initiate the conversation with visitors. We wanted them to think, and talk, self-consciously

about the ways artifacts and landscapes shape our memories. We wanted visitors to reflect how historical memory serves social and political ends. Most of all, we wanted people to leave the gallery with an awareness that history is complex and socially constructed. Using the fair as a case study, we would ask visitors to reflect on the many ways people fashion and refashion historical accounts to make sense of the past and to help explain the present.

The NEH-funded exhibit, *Meet Me at the Fair: Memory, History, and the 1904 World's Fair*, opened in June 1996 on two levels of the Missouri Historical Society museum in St. Louis.¹ The first exhibit section, located on a balcony overlooking the main gallery, interpreted the fair as an historical event. Visitors circled the balcony before taking an elevator to the main floor where label text invited them to consider the many ways St. Louisans have used the memory of the fair since its eight-month run in Forest Park. We hoped this spatial separation would help visitors make a clear distinction between the history of the event itself and the history of its memory.



In the balcony space, we interpreted the fair as a multifaceted experience by focusing on the experiences of fifteen specific and very different individuals. Each one, we suggested, attended a different fair; for each, the event had a different meaning. Visitors circling the balcony encountered, among others, the mayor of St. Louis intent on redeeming the city's tarnished image; a female fairgoer visiting the exhibit palaces and buying souvenirs; an Iggorot woman from the Philippines hired to perform and live in a pseudo native village; an African-American teacher concerned about racial discrimination on the fairgrounds; a fourteen-year-old courier, and an entrepreneurial exhibitor. In using this multiple-perspective approach, we hoped to satisfy visitors hungry for factual information, while at the same time introduce the idea that one's experience of an event—and subsequently one's memory of it—is shaped not only by one's role in it, but also by a variety of broad social factors, particularly class, race, gender. Individuals with different perspectives attach different, sometimes contradictory, meanings to an event. The past is as complicated as the present.

Exhibits are about looking at stuff; they are perhaps the best place to raise questions about how artifacts anchor memories that in turn influence our thinking about the meaning of the past. In the main gallery space we interpreted the fair as an historical memory by placing fair souvenirs in the context of family memories. Like photographs and other historical artifacts, souvenirs reinforce memories by providing the illusion of a direct, tangible link with the past. Stories associated with souvenirs people brought home from the fair have transmitted impressions of personality, values, and emotions across generations of St. Louisans, and have helped to organize

family memories into family history. By exhibiting these artifacts in context, we hoped not only to encourage conversations in the gallery like the one I had witnessed in Chicago, but also to participate by provoking a self-conscious discussion of family history-making. Exhibit labels and a video encouraged visitors to talk with each other about the personal photographs and brief stories that accompanied objects displayed in shadow boxes. Questions on other labels prompted discussion about how visitors might have used objects in constructing the history of their own families.

We also wanted visitors to consider how family memories are shaped by artifacts, stories, and pictures into a family narrative, and to see how public memories fit into a larger historical narrative. A video entitled "What is History?" introduced the idea that history is an intellectual construction: interpretation supported by evidence. The section on Public Memory asked visitors to consider the relationship between the memory of the fair and its subsequent history. We provided evidence that vernacular memories of the fair—the legends and lore of popular history—are social constructions with evolving histories of their own.

While it was important that visitors thought about the ways legends and lore influence local history, we also wanted them to consider how people have deliberately used World's Fair symbolism for social and political purposes. Historical memory helps define, legitimate and implement public policy. In a city with a well-defined business elite, the official memory continually reminded the populace of who had orchestrated St. Louis' finest hour. Throughout the 20th century various groups, including the Missouri Historical



Society, have also used the memory of the fair to serve present concerns and future expectations. We hoped that visitors would see that public memory—what we call history—is a social construction, a synthesis of booster, scholarly, and popular interpretations of past events and their meaning.

What Meanings Did Visitors Take From the Exhibit?

Did the exhibit succeed in stimulating visitors to engage in the conversation we proposed? Did recognizing the multiple perspectives of participants in a historical event necessarily lead to a dialogue about different interpretations of history and the concept of history-making itself? A survey of visitor experience conducted by Randy Korn provided some insight into the extent to which the exhibit supported, facilitated and enhanced the meaning-making experience. The multiple perspective approach that challenged the traditional narrative encouraged meaning making by stimulating some visitors to see the fair not only as an historical event with many different meanings for its participants, but also as a historical memory with a richer, more complex meaning for themselves. Most visitors accepted the idea that people experience events differently, although the more they were invested in a particular perspective the less interested they seemed to be in other views. As we expected they would, people with strong personal interest in the fair and visitors who identified with specific perspectives engaged immediately with the interpretation.

Members of the World's Fair Society, for example, who meet regularly to celebrate the memory of the fair, have generally characterized it as local historical Disneyland, an interpretation reinforced by hundreds of romantic, sanitized photographs distributed by the fair's publicity department in 1904. Assuming the exhibition would reflect this version of the story, many lent artifacts and volunteered to be gallery docents. Before *Meet Me at The Fair* opened, we held a series of workshops to introduce the fifteen featured individuals and their perspectives, starting with the white fairgoer with whom we thought they would most identify. We suggested that the white fairgoer's perspective captured just one of many different and equally valid experiences, and most docents agreed, as did most visitors we surveyed later.

Some visitors resisted our attempts to initiate a dialogue that included the perspectives of native people exhibited on the fairgrounds or African Americans who faced rejection at restaurants and comfort stations. People who needed the fair to be a magic kingdom did not like this exhibit—one man accused us of “making a concentration camp of Disneyland”—but most responses were positive. Visitor evaluations showed that people were receptive to the multiple-perspective approach and liked seeing the fair through different eyes.

The perspective African-Americans brought to the museum differed, of course, from that of white visitors and so did the meaning they made of it. Of the fifteen fair participants introduced in the gallery, three were middle-class African-Americans who had taken active roles in the fair. While each of these individuals had experienced racial discrimination, black visitors and staff were pleased that they were portrayed as historical actors, not simply victims.

Labels explained that World's Fair officials, looking for record attendance, established a non-discrimination admission policy, but did not enforce it with private concessionaires. Past experience taught us that African American visitors, understandably suspicious of mainstream historical interpretation, want to see the evidence and evaluate it themselves. Although it is not considered good museum practice, we displayed long newspaper articles and the complete text of letters related to discrimination on the fairgrounds to give all our visitors material for reflection and discussion.

We were reminded again that people of the same race and class do not necessarily see things from the same perspective. A few African-American teachers objected to the emphasis on de facto discrimination. They did not want black school children to have a negative memory of their city's most remembered, most important event. Informal surveys revealed, however, that before coming to the exhibit many African Americans believed they would not have been admitted to the fairgrounds at all.

St. Louisans of Philippine descent also had a strong personal interest in the fair and, consequently, in our interpretation of the Philippine perspective. Iggorot tribesmen had performed in the Philippine Village, a popular, government-sponsored exhibit designed to illustrate cultural differences between groups of Filipinos. One of the most persistent stories from the fair is that Iggorot men raided a nearby neighborhood, now called Dogtown, for pets to roast in their staged dog-feasts. Both the explanation for the name and the dog-napping are probably urban myths; the dogs killed and eaten came from the city pound.

In planning the exhibit we approached representatives of the Philippine Arts Association because we knew they found the story offensive and the memory painful. We wanted to expose the racism fostered by the legend and by the widely-distributed photographs of Iggorots killing dogs; they wanted visitors to know about other Filipinos who also participated in the fair. Association members lent us 1904 artifacts from more Westernized Filipinos and photographs of current Filipino cultural activities.

We invited Philippine Arts Association members to preview the exhibit. They were appalled that we planned to display



the historical photographs and the 1904 racist cartoons alongside their images and artifacts. The Association members had been convinced we were going to substitute one interpretation for another, that we would present only their version of Philippine culture as a corrective. They did not expect to see the visually powerful “dog eating” images that allied their community with a culture with which they did not want to be associated. In our fervor to be historically accurate and rehabilitate the memory of the Igorots, we had not sufficiently considered the meaning these images might have for middle-class St. Louisans of Filipino heritage. The long, painful negotiation that resulted in compromise made us aware once again of just how important and difficult it is to balance academic rigor, interpretive goals, and visitor meaning.

How Well Did We Meet Our Goals?

We were generally successful in generating a three-way conversation between visitors, artifacts and exhibit team in the section of the exhibit that interpreted the fair. Dialogue about the multiple perspectives of participants in a specific historical event, however, did not necessarily stimulate visitors to engage in a similar conversation about the multiple perspectives that inform the history-making process in general.

In the main gallery, we asked visitors to consider the meaning of historical events such as the World’s Fair in their own lives and in the way they think about the past. Few seem to have questioned the importance of the fair to St. Louis history or to have analyzed their own fascination with it. For the most part they were primarily interested in learning and talking about the fair itself and in looking at the evidence than in responding to the issues we raised. We may have been less successful in stimulating visitors to discuss history-making for three reasons. One, we engaged in a “bait and switch.” Most of the publicity generated by the Missouri Historical Society reinforced the idea that this exhibit was only about the 1904 World’s Fair. Visitors, therefore, came to see an exhibit about the fair and that is what they saw. Two, the museum offered very little programming that explored the interpretive themes and many programs that reinforced the local belief that the fair was the most important event in the city’s history, one that requires no explanation for the persistence or use of its memory. And finally, the design of the exhibit gallery did not always make sufficient distinction between the past and the present, or the fair and the memory of the fair. There were probably not enough stimulating visual clues. The label text was particularly clear, direct and personal where we focused on the fifteen individuals on the balcony, but became longer and more abstract in the sections about the history of the fair. I do not think this means we should simplify ideas—people deal with complexity every day—but we must keep improving our methods of communication.

The people who have joined most enthusiastically in the interpretive conversation are out-of-towners, and people with specific perspectives or personal connections to the fair. Out-of-towners bring no particular emotion to the exhibit; in fact, they often are curious to know why St. Louisans are so fixated on the fair. Members of the World’s Fair Society and the Philippine Arts Association challenged our interpretation with their unique perspectives and, in doing so, engaged us in a dialogue about the meaning of the past. People with personal connections to the World’s Fair were most interested in the interaction between memory and history. They were interested in the idea that events, images, and objects anchor family history and help to sustain it. Even if they had not looked at it that way before, they came away with a better understanding of why they cared about the fair as an historical event.

Can an exhibit that explicitly addresses meaning making in the social construction of a specific historical event be successful in provoking visitors to a broad exploration of how we extract meaning from the past? People come to museums to experience things, not words, and therefore, any exhibit interpretation works best when the focus is kept on objects. In the case of *Meet Me at the Fair* meaning making was best provoked in the section where we encouraged visitors to consider how treasured family objects influenced family narratives. By suggesting that objects and images are important factors in determining what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget in our personal history-making, we may have started a conversation that will influence the way visitors think about community and national history as well.

1. *Meet Me at The Fair: Memory, History and the 1904 World’s Fair*. Katharine T. Corbett, Howard S. Miller, Patricia Adams, Carol Christ, interpretation team; Whitney Watson, designer; Myron Freedman, exhibition production; Caitlin McQuade, video production. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO. Opened June 1996.

