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Remembering Why: Finding Direction in the Face of Unsustainable Collections Practices

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Remembering Why:
Finding Direction in the Face of Unsustainable Collections Practices

By

Megan Barr

An Abstract of a Thesis
In
Museum Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts
May 2021

State University of New York
Buffalo State
Department of History and Social Studies Education

Abstract

Shifts in the philosophy and practices that guide museums have changed the way we collect and what we collect. However, professional standards and expectations related to the management and use of those collections have largely remained unaltered. Museum professionals are repeatedly confronted by the impracticality and near impossibility of achieving accepted professional standards when managing collections. It is clear that the profession needs to rethink the practices and policies that shape our daily work assumptions, but where do we begin? Using Simon Sinek's Golden Circle as a guide, we will rearticulate our purpose and reexamine the practices that get in our way. I believe that museums are unique in their ability to use objects to tell stories, to make meaning, and to connect visitors with the past, others, and even themselves. Understanding human – object relationships helps us articulate why objects matter to people and why objects really belong in museums. With this in mind we can see how vital it is that our collections become relevant once again; that our collections serve our missions, relate to our audiences, and most importantly have a useful life outside of storage in exhibition and programs. Our goal as professionals should be to enhance our collections' meaning, vitality, and use, not preserve them into irrelevance. To accomplish this, we need to encourage thoughtful acquisitions, streamline deaccessioning, and simplify cataloging and preservation practices. We must expand the way we talk about and think about objects and make our collections more inclusive.

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Introduction

Museums are changing, they always do. Shifts in the philosophy and practices that guide museums have changed the role of museum collections, the significance of objects, and their use in exhibitions and programs. Collections, once believed to be the sole purpose of our institutions, are not necessarily the most prominent feature of many museum experiences. Today museums are moving away from their traditional object-centered identity toward more visitor-centered experiences. Professionals from across departments – exhibition developers and designers, to educators, curators, and collections manager are contemplating the role of museums, collections, and their objects. These changes need not be problematic, in fact carefully examining the role that objects play in creating our visitor-centered experiences provides opportunities to rethink and reimagine the world of objects within that visitor experience. In order for museums to remain relevant in ever changing times, it is important that professionals ask themselves “What functions are objects supposed to perform in museums, and how do museums’ structures contribute to that work?” (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 14).

This question is of utmost importance, given that despite changing philosophy regarding visitor needs, professional standards and expectations related to the management and use of collections have largely remained unaltered. Trends towards professionalization were established during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They have since produced a community of professionals who possess specialized knowledge and technical skills. However, with this specialization came the hierarchical organization of objects within the museum. This consisted of a top-down structure of access and management by staff that became functionally separate. This separation divided the work of museums into isolated departments. Eventually, this divide led to placing collection objects under the purview of single departments, rather than sharing them among the

entire museum. This structure slowly led to a museum in which the objects became a secondary element of the museum practice rather than a focal point for all the aspects of museum functions (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 14).

Though those that directly handle the collection have a strong connection to and intimate knowledge of the objects, typically the true contents of a collection are a mystery to visitors and staff alike, only unlocked by the curator or collections manager (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 14). This lack of connection - physically, intellectually, and emotionally – has created a barrier for many museum professionals in knowing the power of using objects in the museum. Additionally, the training that different personnel have around the purpose and intention of collections, exhibitions, or programs can exacerbate these divisions. Museum educators and exhibit designers base their projects around content and objects with a particular goal of learning and interaction. Curators have a deep knowledge of the content and history of an object along with a perspective of that object within a broader field of study. Collection managers, who have learned classification schemes and know the standardized terminology used in collection databases, work with objects through these classifications (Ibid). Each relates differently to objects and speaks their own language about objects.

The challenge with this traditional system of object organization is that it limits the potential for all museum professionals to make the best use of the human element in helping visitors relate to objects (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 15). This limitation started to become obvious as museums found their exhibits lacked relevance or connection to their visitor. In turn, many museums have shifted to worrying about what is in their collection to how the visitor will experience the messages and content of the exhibitions.

Those early days in the profession saw the establishment of collections policies and procedures, created complex legal and ethical frameworks for accessioning and deaccessioning, and set “professional standards” for collection records, environments, and security that still guide the field today. However, what professionals at the time did not yet realize, was just how young the field was. Those standards and high expectations were yet to be tested by the practical realities of museum operations (J. Vaughn xv). In their efforts to establish professional standards, they inadvertently enshrined them as unchallengeable, to be preserved right along with the collections themselves.

As any museum professional can attest, over four decades later, we are continually confronted by the impracticality and near impossibility of achieving accepted professional standards when managing collections. There is never enough time, money, or staff (J. Vaughn xvi). Accepted standards often define decisions and processes in black and white. However, managing collections, especially in smaller institutions today, involves more shades of gray and relies on situational decision making and common sense.

Unlike collections management, museum education, exhibitions, and visitor services have begun to make changes to meet the evolving needs of visitors. Shifts in museum philosophy recognize that audiences have changed and that museums need to change. We are working to make museums more inclusive, more audience-centered, and better equipped to engage in dialogue to remain useful and relevant in a changing world. Yet for collections, relevance is about ensuring that the collection serves the mission, relates to the museum audiences, and has a viable life beyond the storeroom walls in exhibition and programs (Jones, Tisdale and Wood, Introduction 1). We need to reconcile museum visitors’ contemporary relationship to material culture with updated museum practices. If collections are to be truly valuable in shaping and

driving the stories, ideas, and values we present to the public, then our collections practices need to change along with the rest of the museum (Jones, Tisdale and Wood, Introduction 2).

Changing our approach will not be easy. A number of legal, ethical, institutional, logistical, financial, and, of course, human factors are in the way.

What the profession needs to remember is the power of objects. We need to make it our goal to enhance their meaning, vitality, and use, rather than hide them away, forgotten and gathering dust in storage. We must remember that “museums are fundamentally about people and about use” (Jones, Tisdale and Wood, Introduction 3). Now that we’ve established just how important objects are for the visitor’s experience, we need to rethink how we acquire, manage, and interpret them. In the rapidly changing world of museums, we need flexible and practical approaches to managing collections.

In their Manifesto, the Active Collection Project perfectly captures the issues with current collections management and articulates what they believe to be the necessary changes the field must make. They assert that countless objects and artifacts held in museums are not actively supporting the mission of the organization that stewards them. Museums retain thousands of poorly maintained, inadequately cataloged, and underutilized artifacts (Tisdale and Jones, A Manifesto For Active History Museum Collections 7). These so-called “lazy” artifacts drain vital resources. While some have suggested that the issue is a lack of funding, that more money would allow us to clear up our ever-growing backlogs, we must ask ourselves what is the point of preserving collections if they do not actively support the mission? They believe collections must advance the mission or they must go (Ibid).

Despite changing opinions on the value of collection items, our management practices have yet to follow suit. Professional standards and museum training programs still mainly

support the idea that all collections are equally important, and that owning collections is just as important an endeavor as using them. A new model for thinking about collections is needed (Tisdale and Jones, *A Manifesto For Active History Museum Collections* 7). Objects are a deeply powerful way to connect with what it means to be human and to understand the past, present, and future (Ibid). Telling history with things is essentially what museums are for and in this way, they are uniquely positioned to use things to tell meaningful stories but in order to do so properly, they must collect the right objects and make good use of them (Ibid).

Take for example the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York who rebranded their entire organization adhering to changing museum philosophy. During their mission revision between 2004 and 2006 their focus shifted away from their core collection of toys in an attempt to build a more viable visitor experience through the idea of play instead. Here they worked to find ways to make meaningful connections between visitors and the museums objects. By recalibrating its focus from a museum about toys (just objects) to one about play (people and objects) the Strong Museum became more meaningful and relevant for its target family audience (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 26).

Museums don't just preserve things, they use them to inspire, enlighten, and connect. Everyday museums balance the twin needs of preservation and access. Every time a piece is used for exhibit, simultaneously the decision has been made to shorten its lifespan. These decisions are weighted against its condition and how important it is to the museum. Yet common practice assumes that all collections are equally valuable and are worthy of the same standard of care. They believe that some objects support the mission better than others, not based on their monetary value, but based on the stories they tell and the ideas they hold (Tisdale and Jones, A

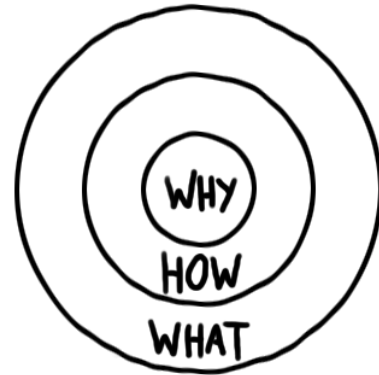
Manifesto For Active History Museum Collections 8). The ones that provide the most public value should get the largest share of our time and resources (Ibid).

As we have professionalized, we've created the expectation that objects will be treated equal and be kept forever. Once again, advancing the idea that all collections are equally and will be preserved forever has continued to prop up the idea that museums exist solely to preserve objects, and simultaneously served as a barrier for any attempts at innovation, doing anything that may seem to violate best practice. Our communities' needs are ever evolving, why should museums care for objects that no longer meet their needs? While we've been so focused on preserving everything for fear that we cannot predict what will be relevant in the future, we have diverted attention and care from objects that are useful right now (Tisdale and Jones, A Manifesto For Active History Museum Collections 8). The conversation must shift from caring for artifacts to caring about people.

We cannot continue on this way, we are living in an era of hyper consumption and production. Museums as a whole need to change how and what we collect or we'll never catch up or at best become nothing more than hoarders. Though some organizations have stopped collecting contemporary objects, this merely ignores the issue and cannot be our solution. Similarly, museums love telling donors about the size of their collection, equating quantity with quality. We need to stop bragging about the size of our collection and instead start talking about impact (Tisdale and Jones, A Manifesto For Active History Museum Collections 8).

It is clear that we, as a profession, need to rethink all of the practices and policies that shape our daily work assumptions but where do we begin? I believe the solution can be found in the world of business with Simon Sinek's concept of the Golden Circle. This concept articulates that every organization, individual, and in this case profession, operate on three levels: WHAT

we do, HOW we do it, and WHY we do it (Sinek). In organizations that place too much emphasis on WHAT they do, those that focus on all their systems and processes in pursuit of their tangible result, their ability to thrive and inspire diminishes. As more value is placed on volume over clarity, organizations suffer. A common practice is to go back



to the original purpose, cause, or belief to help these organizations adapt. This belief, this sense of purpose is what Sinek calls the WHY (Sinek). The ability to put WHY into words provides an emotional context for decisions and acts as a filter to make better decisions. HOWs are then the actions taken to bring the WHY to life. They are the values or principles that guide HOW to bring your cause or belief to life. HOW we do things manifests in the systems and processes within an organization and the culture.

Seen through Sinek's perspective, I believe that museums have lost their WHY. Though the field understands that our audiences are changing and that we need to change with them in order to remain relevant, too much emphasis has been placed on WHAT we do while our HOWs, our best practices, have become our own obstacles. For our collections to become relevant once again we must ensure that our collections serve our missions, relate to museum audiences, and most importantly have a viable life outside of storage in exhibition and programs. I believe in the power of objects, that they are ultimately our WHY. Our goal as professionals should be to enhance their meaning, vitality, and use, not preserve them into irrelevance.

The idea that objects have meaning and power calls our attention to the transformative nature of the visitor-object experience. What matters most in these moments are the ways in which the person encounter objects. By understanding visitor interactions with objects, museum

professionals can begin to examine the stories and information that comes from them. We can start by asking ourselves, “What role and purpose did any of these objects serve for their owners? Why did they end up in a museum? What do these objects say to our current visitors? (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 19). Answering these questions can help to demonstrate the importance of museum objects and reveal the meaning and significance they can make to museum visitors.

Understanding human – object relationships provides value by articulating why objects matter to people. Looking at the meanings people ascribe to objects, inside museums and out, reveals the foundational role that objects serve in our lives. This in turn can help us more closely examine a deeper way of looking and knowing the world around us. Encounters with objects can stimulate or represent experiences that enable personal growth and development; this is an essential component of learning (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 20). Wood and Latham’s Object Knowledge Framework demonstrates how a person brings different dimensions from their individual experience to any object encounter. Similarly, the object itself has a range of qualities and factual information that make up its presence, which in turn contribute to a way a person encounters it. When the two meet, information about the object mixes with a person’s own life experiences and perspective. This results in powerful sensory, emotional, and intellectual awareness for the visitor, what Wood and Latham call the Unified Experience.

Creating places for meaningful exchanges of ideas between visitors and objects is one of the marvels of what museums do. As we strive to bring visitors to the center of our work, we need to remember the important role objects can play. “The union of peoples’ experiences and the unique characteristics of objects forms the foundation of something far greater than the sum of its parts” (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 9).

Literature Review

As a museum consultant specializing in smaller organizations with unmanaged collections, I became frustrated by current museum collections practices and the unachievable standard they created for organizations with small budgets and untrained staff. Looking for solutions, I found inspiration in Simon Sinek's *Start with Why*. His concept of the Golden Circle helps businesses, organizations, and individuals remember their guiding purpose, cause or belief (their why) to reexamine their practices and better align themselves with their authentic purpose. In doing so they are not only more authentic but successful in their endeavors. As a long time "objects person," I recognized that objects hold a special significance, they are the anchors to meaning and experience. It is my opinion that the magic objects inspire is why museums exist but as museum culture has shifted over time this power has been forgotten. We have prioritized the materiality of the object over the more significant, powerful, and most importantly, lasting affects they can have on our visitors. We have segregated and hidden our objects away from the rest of a museum's functions, rendering them an afterthought; this is especially true in the face of modern interactive exhibition elements. Frustrated and seeking answers, I sought to better articulate why objects mattered, where their power came from, and how with this understanding museums could examine their practices to better utilize their collections.

I found what I was looking for in two main sources. The first is *The Objects of Experience* by Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham. This source served to best articulate why objects mattered. Here the authors examined objects and visitor experience as a networked system, rather than prioritizing one over the other in a museum setting. They introduced their concept of the Object Knowledge Framework. This framework draws inspiration from a number of disciplines and works to understand how to use objects to connect to museums visitors to

themselves, others, and to larger concepts. The object knowledge experience is not about separating the object from the subject, instead it reveals the potential for shared connection between people and objects.

They begin their research by outlining the way objects contribute to the human experience and examining how people's interactions with objects can benefit the overall museum experience. They present fundamental concepts to their Object Knowledge Framework to examine the ways a person's life experiences and personal perspectives can shape the way they take in information from objects. Rooted in phenomenology, they present how these concepts guide their understanding of the lived experience. To understand their framework, they also examine the way people come to "know" objects not only through cultural connotations and physical qualities but also through familiarity. In this way they frame their main focus on the interrelated nature of the individual, group, and material meanings of objects and how they provide the foundation for understanding the role of objects and collections in museums.

They go on to explore the unique nature of human relationships with objects. By exploring the different ways of experiencing objects, the authors show how memory, meaning, and transformation can come from deep and meaningful object interactions. They present narrative examples from individuals regarding childhood objects, everyday objects, and museum objects. They demonstrate how objects generate a sense of identity for a person, aid in an individual's relation to other people, and open up doorways to new ideas and experiences. The research presented captures some of the key meanings that people attribute to objects in a number of settings, and explores how objects support identity, stimulate revelations, and evoke a sense of reverence in peoples lived experiences.

To support Wood and Latham, I drew on the findings from Kiersten Latham's "Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects" and Randy C. Roberts' "Questions of Museum Essence: Being, Being With, and Finding Connection in Conversation" whose research examined the museum visit experience, what it reveals about the connections between human experience and museums, and the essential role of museums as communal and cultural institutions. Both researchers interviewed individuals after their museum visit and found several common themes appeared in their experiences all of which speak to the powerful role of objects in a creating meaning and profound experience for the visitor.

My second main source, *Active Collections*, was produced by the Active Collections Project which seeks to develop new approaches to collections, ones that are more effective and sustainable. The collection of articles is meant to reconcile the museum visitor's contemporary relationship to the material world with museum practices that desperately need to be updated. The first section, "Conceptual Frameworks", focuses on larger concepts surround collections and their role in society. It constructively questions the established theories, values, and assumptions museum professionals make about our collections, and suggests ways we might change our beliefs to better serve our communities. The section, "New Ideas and Tools for Change" looks at new practices, exploring how museums might better work with collections after challenging long held assumptions. The works presented in this volume come from a number of authors with a wide variety in background and perspectives.

In her chapter "Ten Principles for an Anti-Racist, Anti-Orientalist, Activist Approach to Collections" Masum Momaya begins by exploring the troubling history of collecting and museums and their role in validating supremacy through their objects and interpretations. She introduces the ways these systems are still affecting today's museums and provides a list of

principles and strategies to consider how we can actively work to make our collections anti-racist and anti-colonialist.

In “Objects or People,” Rainey Tisdale calls for a shift in focuses for museums from caring about artifacts to caring about people. She investigates current trends and phenomena and looks at what today’s museum audiences truly need from museums as they grapple with enormous amounts of change in the world around us. She emphasizes the need for our institutions to provide equity to marginalized communities. She then calls for museums to set examples for healthy relationships with the material world and examine our relationship with hyper consumerism in a materialistic society. Relatedly, she examines how our practices can become more environmentally friendly and sustainable. She also explores how museums can affect people’s sense of self and encourage introspection and healing, transformative experiences. She examines how to approach museum objects and their experiences like poetry and how to capitalize on the emotional and moving affect they can have on our audiences.

Modupe Labode’s “Museum Collections and Public Feelings” observes and analyzes the relationship between things and feelings in the public sphere. The resulting concept of “public feelings” articulates complex emotions expressed in public spaces that emerge in response to social, political, and economic events or factors. She applies this concept to her exploration of emotions in museums and recommend that museums learn to discuss such emotions to better animate the stories held in our objects.

Elizabeth Wood’s “The Vital Museums Collection” discusses the potential found in approaching collections as vital, living systems. Looking to forest management, she explores some of their practices for a thriving environment for inspiration for museum’s collections. She

also discusses some library science methods for weeding their collections, resulting in relevant, useful, and accessible collections.

In “Four Forceful Phrases: An Archival Change Agent Muses on Museology,” Mark A. Greene reflects on the impact of his transformations “More Product Less Process” model for the archival world and what it means today. In this section he continues to call for better collections planning, deaccessioning of obsolete, redundant, and irrelevant collections, more efficient means of approaching cataloging and processing, and emphasizes the need to focus on visitor needs and making collections usable rather than obsessing about our preservation methods. He invites the field to remember we are keepers with a purpose and that purpose is not preservation but use. Greene’s original work, “More Product Less Process” is also sighted here, with this research he examines how processing backlogs have become a problem in archival institutions. He explains that this is a consequence of traditional approaches to processing that remain unchanged. Greene also calls for archivists to rethink the way they process collections and challenges the assumptions archivists make about the importance of preservation, arrangement, and description activities. He suggests the “golden minimum” and recommends that archivists perform the minimum amount of processing needed to get collections into the hands of users.

Turning to more practical methodologies in “Tier Your Collections: A Practical Tool for Making Clear Decisions in Collections Management,” Trevor Jones focuses on ways to tier your collections based on how well they support the mission using his work with the Kentucky Historical Society. This practice helps museums professionals understand which objects in their collections carry more interpretive weight and allows them to treat them accordingly.

Paul Bourcier’s “#Meaning: Cataloging Active Collections” tackles the assumptions of collections catalogs and looks at how our efforts to classify and catalog collections are bound by

our existing professional assumptions. He explores some ways to rethink the current model: by considering the way our objects support the museum's mission and meeting visitor's needs, adding new ways to describe objects beyond intellectual means to include emotional ways of understanding them, and offers ways we can share the task of description writing by opening up our records and including the insights of our visitors in our database.

Gail Steketee looks at the psychology of compulsive hoarding and how it compares to museums collections and their relationships with "stuff" in her chapter "Hoarding and Museums Collections: Conceptual Similarities and Differences." She later returns in "Practical Strategies for Addressing Hoarding in Collections" to provide a fresh perspective as to why letting go of objects is so hard for museum professionals. She then introduces methods for evaluating and changing beliefs along with tools often used by psychologists to offer solutions for deaccessioning in museums.

Lastly Benjamin Filene's "Things in Flux: Collecting in the Constructivist Museum" explores collecting practices of the past and introduces a constructivist model for collecting. He introduces four categories of object we might look to collect, objects like storytelling objects, invented objects, multivalent objects, and preconstructed objects. Embracing collecting as a subjective act offers museums opportunities to include multiple perspectives and create necessary interpretive changes.

Overall, these authors perfectly captured the current issues with collections management and offered a diverse perspective on the possible solutions.

Section 1: Why Are We Here?

Defining Objects

Before we think about and use objects in better ways to connect with visitors, we must first briefly examine the language and meaning that surround a museum's most fundamental aspect. Words like object or artifact refers to what Pearce calls, selected "lumps" of the physical world to which cultural value has been assigned (Pearce 15). Because of their materiality, objects occupy space in our world and this is how we experience them. What distinguishes some "lumps" from others is the cultural value given them through the act of selection. This act turns a part of the natural world into an object and museum piece.

Additionally, objects have their own life span. Though there is a moment when every object is "finished," that is when the manufacturing process is complete, as it moves through time it acquires a history of its own, passing from one person to the next, perhaps from one use to another, from one place to another (Pearce 16). Those objects we perceive to have special value typically have long and complex life spans. Indeed, as Pearce explains it is this materiality of objects and the physicality of their anchorage in time and space that gives them special characteristics: their social life, their unique relationship to past events, and their susceptibility to possession and valuation (Pearce 17).

This first characteristic, the social life of objects, refers to the fact that objects can be found in all aspects of human social life. Without objects, society as we know it would not exist, as Pearce explains their social centrality is indicative that they are intentional inscriptions on the physical world which embody social meaning, or it put it simply; that social ideas cannot exist without physical connect and accordingly physical objects are meaningless without social

content (Pearce 21). This suggests that our ability to produce a world of things is a fundamental part of our ability to create social lives.

The second characteristic is the ability to bring the past into the present by virtue of their relationship to past events. This aspect is fundamental to the collecting, curatorial, and exhibition processes. Indeed, the point of collecting and museums, their unique purpose, revolves around the possession of the “real things”. It is therefore important for us to understand how an object can operate both in the past and the present simultaneously; how it can then create the present and why this nature is so important to us. Pearce illustrates this with an example, telling the story of a sword used at the Battle of Culloden. Because this sword is a genuine element of the action and it survived that battle in its physical reality, the sword then, has a relationship to the past and the present, it was there and it is here (Pearce 24-30). The analytical techniques of semiotics are especially helpful here.

Objects operate as a sign when they stand for the whole of something from which they are an intrinsic part, like the sword for the events at Culloden. Yet they simultaneously act as a symbol when they are brought into an arbitrary association with elements to which they bear no intrinsic relationship (Pearce 27). This is the relationship of a signifier and the signified. It is this ability to be simultaneously signs and symbols, to carry a part of the past into the present while bearing perpetual symbolic reinterpretation that is the fundamental nature of the unique power of objects. Pearce also notes that museum objects bear an eternal relationship to the past, yet it is this relationship that we experience as the power of the actual object or the “real thing” (Pearce 24). It is this relationship that forms the basis for the collection forming process and that of exhibitions that display those objects.

The final characteristic of objects is that of their ability to be possessed and valued. Simply, it is an object's physical nature that allows them to be owned, stored, and exchanged, but the reason this happens to them is found in the value assigned them by the community in which they are found (Pearce 32). As there is nothing inherent about an object's value, socially we are always perceiving the given value of any object. Accordingly, we are also always modifying this value as taste and circumstances change. It is therefore impossible to say whether the individual is changing the value of the objects, or the object is making them change their ideas of value (Ibid). Museum objects may be incredibly valuable, or they may be worth relatively little, but this type of valuation is not the point of museum objects. Regardless of their monetary value they possess a perceived, almost spiritual or intellectual worth and are therefore guarded in a way that puts them in a special distinct category.

Every object in a museum is valuable because it physically represents an aspect of the natural world or human experience. Understanding this allows museum professionals to expand the range of physical things visitors can learn from in museum settings and helps them break out of outdated ways of thinking that may limit the understanding of potential interactions with objects. As we'll explore, relationships with objects are varied, just as varied as the ways people come to know and understand those objects. There are a number of ways of knowing objects, more than just facts. As we'll explore, knowing happens through a person's senses, memory, emotions, and most of all, identity (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 24). These alternative ways of knowing objects – through personal and emotional connections – provide insight into a new realm for museum work.

Meaning and Objects

Paying closer attention to how visitors make connections to objects will be important for museums as they continue to define and refine their purposes and roles in communities and strive to make stronger connections for visitors in their learning and meaning making (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 24). One of the more challenging issues in understanding the role of objects in museums is that the essential meaning and significance of any object is fundamentally unfixed (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 11). What this means is that when a visitor encounters an object, the meaning that they perceive is created by their own particular understanding of the experience. The meaning and value of the object rely on the context in which a person encounters it and depend on their relationship and identity with it (Ibid).

When a person encounters an object in a museum setting, or any setting that is, instead of emphasizing the materiality of an object, meaning is born of their attachments, memories, and experiences with it, what Wood and Latham call, its essence (11). The essence of an object then is incomplete without the person to experience it, to reveal a hidden reality of an object and what it can mean.

Of the number of ways we interact with objects, in each case, the intersection between self and object is facilitated by the breadth of information the person brings to the experience as well as all the potential meanings that objects can hold (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 12). Everyone's understanding of the world is informed by their own intellect, emotions, and experience. These layers of a person's life contribute to the different ways of knowing and being in the world. The more connections a person has with objects, the more meaningful and important those layers become (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience*

11). This is what forms the basis of the social life of objects, as described above. When an object is important to us, we know it inside and out. We can vividly describe it and its associations. Museum professionals who can remember this, who can unlock these key aspects of an encounter with an object can enhance the visitor's ability to make meaning from that experience, to make objects matter.

Traditional exhibition techniques focus on the material and cultural qualities of the object itself. This approach inhibits the potential for personal or emotional connections between visitors and objects; instead, moving beyond the basic information can help form connections on an individual level. Paying greater attention to the visitor's experience with objects offers the opportunity to reinvigorate the meaning, value, and relevance of the museum as a whole. Museum professionals need to acknowledge that experience and meaning making in our museums does not occur without objects. Nor is it our collections that create the museum experience alone, it is the act of bringing together people *and* objects; objects are the basis for the visitor experience (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 13).

In order to better understand the intersection of a museum visitor's personal experience, the knowledge and experience of museum staff, and the unique opportunities museums have in creating meaningful encounters with objects we must first understand the nature of "lived experience" in the context of object encounters.

Lived Experience and Objects

The notion that objects and their stories are not completed but are something to be lived, something that grows from people's experience and understanding of them is the foundation of visitor experience, meaning making, and the value of objects as a whole. This lived experience,

however, can be difficult to describe. Our love of objects and meaning making through them is not necessarily obvious in our everyday lives, but museum experience offers a beneficial lens to examine this process. When a museum object provokes an awareness in a visitor, they may intentionally seek out a deeper meaning of that objects through investigation or contemplation (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 26). This is when museum magic starts to happen.

The lived experience of something occurs when a person is aware of the experience they are having while it is occurring, though they may not be able to immediately articulate it. In this sense they are completely wrapped up in the moment, only able to intentionally reflect on the experience after it has occurred. Accordingly, when it comes to the lived experience of an object, knowing the meaning and importance of the object, is not just immediate or passing knowledge. This kind of knowledge is felt on a deep emotional, physical, and psychological level. The more a person actively connects to and contemplates their object encounter, the more they become aware of the experience (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 27).

Phenomenology offers insights into understanding the lived experience, this philosophy tries to understand human experience. It does not separate objects and subjective meaning, instead it emphasizes the immediate, sensorial and individual way of seeing the world (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 27). It uses direct experiences to understand the many different ways that people come to understand the world. The hallmark of phenomenology is that it holds that every person's experience of the world is relative to their own perspective. It examines a person's active involvement in the meaning making process and helps enhance the overall ways of understanding and knowing the world around us (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 28).

This school of thought gives museum professionals insights into the visitor's lifeworld: the immediate, dynamic, and direct world that every person inhabits (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 28). The lifeworld is something that each person has and is always and already there to encounter and be encountered. It is composed of the person's immediate present, their past, and their future. It becomes a part of each environment the person encounters, contributes to, and is in turn changed by; it is permeable. These bubbles potentially change when they come into the museums and experience objects and exhibitions. What people see comes filtered through all the dimensions of their lifeworld.

Phenomenology gives us the ability to recognize that knowing the world means being in the world, experiencing it. This idea holds that people are therefore not separate entities from each other but intertwined with the world around them. This can make examining an object's influence on the human experience difficult to see. This concept of an enmeshed person-world is called intentionality (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 28). Given this constant connection we are always in relationship to objects.

There is a specific sensation that occurs when an object captures a person's attention, and they need to consciously or purposefully use their prior experiences to try and make sense of it. They must now examine the sensory inputs that help them determine what the thing in question is. This process of becoming acutely aware of the experience a person is having is called consciousness in phenomenology (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 29). Consciousness is merely the consciousness of something and this process of perception also deeply involves the whole body (Ibid). Bodily knowledge incorporates not only the traditional five senses but the sensations of time, space, and interpersonal awareness (Ibid). Operating together, these elements contribute to the way a person creates meaning and understands their

lived experience. Recognizing the role of these principles outlined by phenomenology in visitor object encounters gives museum professionals ways to understand and support visitors in their meaning making.

Phenomenology also offers clues into objects' important role in the visitor's experience. As people encounter objects, they begin to make sense of the world. They make meaning from their experiences. In this sense, the object functions like a mirror; ideas are reflected back at them through the object (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 30). These ideas come from within, from their own experiences, through their lifeworld. This notion is especially important for encounters with objects in a museum setting. As Wood and Latham state "every object has the potential to support a visitor in making meaning, every object has the potential to reflect something back onto its viewer, and every object has the potential to create a moment of consciousness within the visitor" (30). Objects allow a person to create meaning in the world because they serve as a focal point for bringing ideas, thoughts, and meaning together in the same place. This makes every museum object potentially influential and vital in more ways than the field has recognized in the past.

Because meaning is created through objects, each object can have a very different meaning or explanation. In museums we knowingly use objects as part of a communication process: they serve as anchors and instruments for explaining or interpreting a message. The museum visitor in turn is constantly making sense of those objects and the museum's interpretation by translating that message into their own experience (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 30). This underscores the idea that both museums and visitors are interpreters and translators of objects.

Wood and Latham posit that what visitors may need is not necessarily more museum interpretation of an object, but instead a transformation of that object with new ways of knowing

it to help the visitor create or expose meaning from an object at multiple levels (31). In this way museum professionals act more like “object advocates” and set up opportunities to use objects in ways that not only reveal more layers of information but will also provide opportunities for visitors to project their own life experiences onto objects (Ibid). Strategies like this will allow meaning to be reflected back to the visitor and reaffirm the value of the object in their lives.

This lived experience of visitors and objects in the museum is the starting point for Wood and Latham’s Object Knowledge Framework. As we’ll explore in detail, this Framework takes into account the different ways of knowing an object. This allows us to better understand our human connection and attachment to objects, and why they matter. This framework blends contemporary museum practices, what museum professionals know about their collection objects, with an appreciation for the unique interest, preexisting knowledge, and personal experiences of the visitors.

The Object Knowledge Framework

Drawing inspiration from the philosophical thinkers and concepts above, Wood and Latham closely examined the visitor-object experience, resulting in what they call the Object Knowledge Framework. This Framework provides the means to explore the processes through which visitors come to know objects in museum spaces. The value of the Framework is its ability to articulate the relationship between three elements of a museum object encounter: first is what the visitor is bringing to the experience, what Wood and Latham call the visitor’s “lifeworld”; the second is how the museum is presenting the object within that experience, the “objectworld”; and third is what results when the two worlds meet, the visitor’s “unified experience” (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 32).

It's important to note that the unified experience is more than a mere interaction with an object, a unified experience is its own unique entity, a moment that can only exist when a person's lifeworld and the sensations, perceptions, and awareness they have of an object blends with the qualities and features of the objectworld (Ibid). The unified experience is a liminal space in which a visitor takes in the information and the meaning from the objectworld through the filter of their own lifeworld. Each of these unique worlds are themselves constructed of various dimensions representing many different ways of knowing objects.

Dimensions of the Lifeworld

Wood and Latham depict a visitor's lifeworld as a bubble that surrounds every person like an aura. Within this field are the person's ways of knowing the world through their past experiences, sense, emotions, and knowledge; what the authors call dimensions (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 33). While everyone's own dimensions are composed of different information and experience unique to their own life, there are three primary dimensions of every lifeworld as explained by Wood and Latham: individual ways of knowing, group ways of knowing, and material ways of knowing (34). Each of these dimensions are always operating in unison but only certain specific pieces of information or perspectives may be relevant at any one time. This allows for multiple entry points for visitors to learn from and experience museum objects in many meaningful ways.

The individual dimension is composed of the personal significance an object holds to the individual viewer, it is the most immediate, and likely the first connection a visitor will have with an object. The viewer comes to know the object based on their lived experience with it or similar objects. This dimension serves as a threshold to the viewers prior knowledge, experiences, and any opinions the person may be carrying about the object in question. These

might include, as we'll explore later, the connection a person makes between an object and their own identity, a personal narrative or story, or a biographical meaning, association, or connection (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 34).

The individual dimension is also important because it will also affect how the other layers of the lifeworld are expressed, “personal experiences will shape how someone observes the material features of an object and will inform their group perspectives on its importance” (Ibid). This in turn affects how a visitor will direct their attention toward museum objects.

The group dimension contains a wide assortment of universal experiences and themes, as well as the social, cultural, and historical meaning of objects. This dimension provides the background for meaning, and articulate elements of the object from a shared group perspective. It is this type of group significance that an object gains its legitimacy or sense of value and meaning. It is this dimension that museum professionals are usually the most familiar with as museums typically draw in their interpretation from this dimension.

Lastly the material dimension emphasizes the physical, tangible qualities of an object. Elements like composition, appearance, and other specific aesthetic aspects. Wood and Latham note that this dimension also includes the manner in which the museum has presented the object within other exhibition elements.

Dimensions of the Objectworld

Similar to a person's lifeworld, objects bring various elements to the object-person encounter. Wood and Latham define the objectworld as all of the information, actions, events, and people associated with the object over its life; it also includes the manner in which the museum has presented that information into the museum's experience (Wood and Latham, *The*

Objects of Experience 35). Like the lifeworld, the objectworld is also broken down into individual, group, and material dimensions.

In the case of the objectworld, the group dimensions include broad human themes and universal perspectives, these are drawn from across time, place, and communities. They are the more narrative themes that allow the visitors to engage with broader connections to other people and issues and reflect human experiences across time and place (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 36). These themes tend to take the form of sometimes more abstract concepts.

The individual dimension encompasses specific stories about the object, its owners, and the local circumstances where it existed. This dimension allows for unique personal connections to be made or for curators' specific interpretations to be formed. As we'll explore later, stories of an object's use by a specific person can evoke particular feelings or memories in a visitor or the information presented can bring a specific event or circumstances of a specific place or time to life for the visitor (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 37).

The material dimension is the most prominent, and perhaps obvious, dimension of an object. This dimension includes the physical nature of objects and the sensory experience of those objects (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 53). The material make up is simply what it is made of: its medium, form, weight, condition, and dimensions. The sensory experience of an object draws on the classic five sense: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Together these form the concept of materiality (Ibid). This concept places emphasis on knowing through the tangible engagement with physical things. In this way, Wood and Latham explain, objects become important sites for perceptions, emotions, and senses. It is their belief that "museum experiences should incorporate an expansive view of these interactions that allows visitors to unify thinking, doing, and feeling through transactions with objects" (Ibid). Objects,

therefore, invite interaction, and with it, the potential to bring about deeply felt memories, ideas, and emotions. Making objects accessible in this way is essential to building visitor-object encounters.

The material nature of objects is typically where learning from them begins. It is the physical qualities of an object, and the manner in which the museum has presented those features, that provide information and context to the viewer. Having the real, tangible things within the museum environment is the cornerstone of what makes museum experiences unique.

The Unified Experience

As explained, the intermixing of a visitor's lifeworld and the objectworld can result in a unified experience. This experience creates deep meaning or a powerful lived experience, sometimes referred to as an "Aha!" moment, a transcendent sacred experience, a moment of awe and wonder, magic or delight. In this moment the object and the visitor exist in the same space and the visitor creates new knowledge about themselves and the object. These interactions generate the capacity to be transformational because of this unified experience (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 55).

By breaking down the components of the visitor-object experience into more discrete pieces, museum professionals can once again see the value of objects and remember their purpose in museums. Rather than seeing objects in a collection as the sole purpose for museums, and instead of holding visitor experiences as the sole organizer of a museum visit, the goal is instead to understand and exploit the potential for shared connection between people and objects.

Object Relationships

Understanding the visitor-object experience better allows us to now turn our attention to the dynamic nature of the personal relationship with objects. By exploring the different ways of experiencing objects we can see how memory, meaning, and transformation can come from deep and meaningful object interactions. We can investigate the ways in which the lifeworld informs how museums visitors encounter objects and how these encounters generate a sense of identity for the person, serve as a trigger for meaningful memories, and inspire the deeply moving “numinous” (Latham) encounters in museums.

Objects as Identity and Memory

Looking at objects in our everyday experience can provide insight into the ways people narrate their lives with objects and how those objects become part of their identity or provoke ideas, thoughts, emotions, or memories. This information can in turn be quite useful to museum professionals to see how visitors might encounter the objects in our holdings. It is the many ways that people connect to objects that give them meaning and value, regardless of perceived monetary value. Even the mundane everyday items that make up our lives can become fundamentally important in a person’s life. It’s these meaning laden objects that become memorable because of the experiences people attach to them; they reflect and recount experiences and emotional connections; they reveal the lifeworld (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 59). This intellectual and emotional significance form the basis for learning from objects, creating a broad foundation for meaning making to occur.

Turning to the examples of cherished childhood objects we can see how integral such objects can be to a person’s identity. Examining several examples of childhood objects Wood

and Latham note that these objects are significant to a person's identity in two keyways. First, acting like our own personal monuments, these objects are tangible possessions that help to signify a person's existence in the world: they function like containers for one's sense of being (59). Secondly, when these objects are encountered later in life, they offer people a liminal space in which they can move freely between their adult selves and their childhood selves – evoking memories, transporting a person across time and place. These objects make a clear statement in the telling of the owner's life stories. Here the personal connection is the catalyst for the unified experience.

Similarly, these significant connections to things: the relationship to use and purpose of the objects, the personal meanings of the objects, and the meaningful experiences with objects, are the foundation of the unified visitor experience that museums can provide (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 66). People can have the same kind of identity related connection to museum objects. By remembering the ways visitors encounter objects, museum professionals can transform our expertise into meaningful connections with the individuals. Both the objects in the museum and the visitor's meaning making are critical to making a unified experience happen; this experience is only possible when both the life world and the objectworld intersect (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 66).

Personal stories about museum objects similar to those people have from their favorite childhood object are not uncommon, but museum professionals do not always get to hear what visitors think about their objects. There have however been some experimental efforts to make these personal connections with museum objects. One such example is the Portland Art Museum's exhibition *Object Stories*. This project invited visitors and community members to share their personal stories and feelings about important objects from around the museum or their

own lives. Visitors were encouraged to bring objects to the museum, step into a recording booth, and share their “object story.”

Aware of the changing trends in museums, the PAM sought to open the doors for visitors to experience an increased sense of self-efficacy and self-worth by giving them a voice within its institution (Ancelot 275). It also created unique and psychologically healing moments of shared experiences and social connection through the exchange of these stories (Ibid). The staff provided visitors with a range of questions to stimulate ideas for their stories. These questions solicited elements of the visitor’s life world by asking about a time when they encountered the object, what it means, whether that meaning has changed over time, how the object says something about the person, and how they learned the value or importance of the object (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 70). The collected stories covered topics ranging from life experiences and relationships to other personal connections and a range of human emotions like joy, hope, courage, and awe.

This project asserted that “objects make us as fully as we make objects” (Ancelot 280) and showed how objects can signify close relationships with others as well as our past selves, and that the stories surrounding objects have the potential to bring people closer, loved ones and strangers alike. These recorded stories reinforce the personal experiences people have with objects. In the same way that personal objects evoke powerful feeling and experiences the stories about museum objects also hold a high level of personal connection (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 70).

Visitors to the *Object Stories* exhibition created deeper connections to their own memories and feelings central to their object’s meaning. Connections to the institution were also strengthened, adding to their value within their local community, this project created a forum for

deep exchanges. The museum showed itself to be a place that values and supports the needs and overall wellness of its community (Ancelot 281).

Stories told about objects in everyday life and in museums makes it clear that there is an important link between visitors and objects that museums can support. Personal connections people make to objects exploit fundamental aspects of identity and sense of being as well as evoke memories across time and place. By articulating this kind of meaning, museum professionals can gain a similar perspective for objects in museum settings. As Wood and Latham stated, if museums are to remain relevant, then that relevance can come from personal meaning that a visitor attaches to an object, as well as the group and material dimensions that the museum presents (71). Regardless of if the attachments visitors make comes from their own lifeworld or it connects and develops through a museum encounter, the intersection of the visitor and object builds important layers of meaning and relationships between the person, the world around them, and the museum itself. These connections create an important link to our world, and how it helps create who we are as people (Ibid).

Objects as Reverence

Many visitors refer to the powerful, almost sacred nature of some objects and experiences, this is a feeling with which most museum professionals are undoubtedly familiar with as well. Indeed, in a study examining pivotal museum learning experiences of museum professionals, researchers found that participants told stories about early museum experiences. These participants recalled the moments that opened up possibilities for broader life horizons, and elicited strong, deeply felt emotions (Spock). The researchers reported that many of the stories shared centered on museum objects. It was a visitor object experience that changed their lives and led to their current positions.

Borrowing the concept from Cameron and Gatewood, Latham uses their term “numinous” to describe the reverential types of museum experiences. A numinous experience, she explains, “is a meaningful, transcendent experience that results in a deep connection with the past” (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 85). In her own study Latham interviewed visitors from five history and art museums about their deeply felt experiences with museum objects. The results revealed four characteristics of the numinous experience: unity of the moment, the nature of the object as a link to the past and others, a feeling of being transported, and making connections bigger than the self (Latham).

Unity of the Moment

These experiences articulated the holistic and dynamic elements of an encounter between a person and an object during a numinous experience. This element acts as the key feature of the experience, it’s within this experience that the other characteristics occur. The respondents noted sudden moments of clarity had occurred which left a lasting effect on them; their descriptions all included connections that transcended memory, time, and self. Latham emphasizes that the unity of the moment is not a connection that flows through the experience: it is the experience (9).

Object Link

Here the object’s role is emphasized in the visitor object encounter, both its tangible form and its symbolic form. The tangible form acts as a trigger or a link to something: it sparks the perceptions, thought, and/or feelings in the encounter, or it acts as evidence or serves as a witness to the past (Latham 9). The proximity of the object starts the numinous response, interviewees reported that the objects helped to bring the past, a person, or

event to life. In its symbolic form, the object acted as a conduit, holding meanings larger than its intended physical function. Instead, the objects served as a signifier for more conceptual concepts.

Being Transported

This characteristic demonstrated how the numinous experience affected people in ways beyond cognitive comprehension. This involved elements of time, space, and body; Latham notes that participants felt time and space alter and experienced physical reactions throughout their body (10). Consistently respondents reported the sensation of time slowing, tunnel vision, or the sensation of being alone in the room. Most participants also reported physical sensations like feeling a rush, tingling sensations, or the feeling of “butterflies” (Ibid).

Connections Bigger Than Self

This theme refers to the deeply connective elements of a numinous experience. All the respondents described connecting to something: the object, the historic past, their personal past, or something higher in life (Latham 10). These connections centered on the person’s existence in the world, about who they are and why they are here. In this way, these connections helped them understand things about themselves and grasp their place in the world. Latham named three kind of connections: the reflective self, imaginative empathy, and higher things (Ibid).

The reflective self refers to the deeply meaningful personal connections that were made. These were extremely meaningful to each person and demonstrated a lasting effect that,

for some, altered or affected their lives. Here the numinous experience was wrapped up in personal identity, with family, and in life-defining moments (Latham 11).

Imaginative empathy captures the participants relationship to the people associated with the object. Here they connected beyond simple empathy, attempting to conjure the images and personalities of people and events to understand them beyond an intellectual level; attempting to put themselves in that time, place, or event.

Higher things refer to the connections that were deep and sublime; this element is highlighted by connections that were reverential, full of awe, spiritual, deeply meaningful, and extraordinary (Latham 11). Latham notes that participants reported having epiphanic moments as part of their numinous experience where sudden realizations of the meaning of something came to light (Ibid).

There are clear signs of the elements of the Object Knowledge Framework within the numinous, the dimension of the lifeworld mixes with the dimension of the objectworld. Indeed, this study demonstrates how difficult it can be to separate the parts from the whole, specifically the theme of unity of the moment. One can easily draw parallels to Wood and Latham's unified experience, where the lifeworld and objectworld fuse to create a unique experience for the visitor. This characteristic runs through the total experience between the person and the object involves the individual, group, and material dimensions all at once. While object link reminds us that an experience is dependent on the physical object to elicit a powerful response (Wood and Latham, *The Objects of Experience* 95).

Mirroring Latham's study, Roberts also studied visitors' responses to museum encounters to examine the connection between human experience and museums. His study consisted of

twelve participants and ten museums including history, natural history, art, and multidisciplinary museums. When examining their responses, six comparable themes emerged from the participants lived experiences: seeing the self, touching or being touched, being at the fusion of horizons, mindful presence, embodied experience, and experiencing other's experiences (Roberts 95).

Seeing the Self – Here the object encounter served as a catalyst for self-reflection, triggering a personal memory or, as some reported, the sensation of being transported to an earlier time.

Touching and Being Touched – These moments went beyond the cognitive, affective, and physical dimensions. Experiences were reported to be transcendent, spiritual, and awe inspiring. Viewer often described the sensation of being touched by an object in a powerful way that held them in time and place, or experiencing flow stated where they lost track of time (Roberts 96). Here the objects physical presence is again significant, visitors all experienced the desire to reach out and touch the material object they perceived as a spiritual link.

Being at the Fusion of Horizons – The hallmark of this theme is the sensation of occupying multiple spaces and places at the same time. The participants described a feeling of being present yet being simultaneously immersed in the place and time associated with the object.

Mindful Presence – What is significant about this theme is that the participants reported “experiencing the museum as a place where meaning develops, rather than as a place where knowledge is learned” (Roberts 97). They actively created their own meaning as

they moved through the museum and interacted with object. Always in relationship to the objects, they engaged with stories rather than mere facts in their personal interpretive experience.

Embodied Experience – These moments drew on the participants total being, both mind and body. Roberts notes there is no mindful presence without physical presence, in these moments visitors physical experience was enmeshed in their mental and emotional experience (97).

Experiencing Other's Experiences – In this way the museums served as a place for visitors to grasp the lives of others across time and place. Through objects, visitors connected with other's life stories, empathically putting themselves in the place of the other. This opened the viewer up to multiple perspectives and possible connections between the self and other people, ideas, and feelings. As Roberts remarks, the overall experience is of being in relationship with objects, other people and the self (97). In these meaning making experiences, ordinary objects become extraordinary, and visitors find themselves with others and within others circumstance; they connect people, offering opportunities for shared experience (Ibid).

Examining the reverential or numinous experiences with museum objects validates the significance of the unified experience; when the visitor's lifeworld and that of the objectworld meet in harmony, feelings of reverence are evoked. In this moment the commingling of the visitor's intellect and emotions and the real physical object are essential. This expansive moment helps people to make inspiring personal connections within people and places they may never know. Regardless of a visitor's personal take away, this exchange between people and objects is the singular aspect of the museum experience. Indeed, it is the museums role as a site for this

exchange and experience with self, others, and objects, that sets museums apart from other institutions.

Remembering Why

Reclaiming the museum's role in providing unique and compelling encounters with objects is paramount. As we have seen, our objects are not just artifacts, specimens, or artworks; they are tangible things that represent our world. Understanding this shift in the definition of objects and the conception of how museum collections matter to our visitors, how people understand objects and themselves, is a critical component of a successful museum.

The unified experience is a process of understanding. It is the way museums' function, creating spaces of understanding through engaging with the self, exchanging with others, and being in relationship with objects in ways that are meaningful and revealing (Roberts 100). This conversation between objects and people is not just how museums work, it is WHY they exist. Human beings see themselves through the lens of self, others, and objects (Ibid). They experience other's experiences; they bridge past, present, and future; they come to deep understanding; they are engaged; they are moved (Ibid). It is then clear to say that the museum is not about the educational or recreational experience of the visitor nor is it solely about the objects it cares for. The museum is about the conversation between the object and the visitor, it is a place for the encounter and exchange of the unified experience.

Today the museum's traditionally defined purpose is in question. As our professional paradigm shifts again, rather than adjusting to preserve our traditional roles of collection, preservation, and interpretation, there is greater benefit in investing in better understanding the essence and role of our unique institutions (Roberts 100). This shift in perspective could lead to a

better means of using museums resources and expertise to contribute to society by positioning museums as sites of human understanding and connection; places where people are absorbed in contemplation of the self, empathy for others, questions of what it means to be in the world.

Section 2: Hows: Examining Our Best Practices

The changing dialogue around the role and purpose of museums, visitor experience, and objects provides opportunities for museum professionals to build on these insights to fully articulate the value of the objects in our collections. Articulating objects and their significance to our visitors as our WHY can help us adapt to the necessary changes the field is facing. Understanding the power of objects and a museums unique ability to use them for public benefit can be seen as its purpose. Understanding this as our core belief and function is the only way to maintain lasting success and still allow for innovation and flexibility over time.

It is, however, important to understand that a WHY is just a belief (Sinek 67). For our passion to survive it needs structure. A WHY without the HOWs, passion without structure, is a hollow gesture. HOWs are the actions we take to realize our belief (Ibid). They are the values, principles, and practices that guide HOW we bring our purpose to life. HOW we do things can be seen in the culture of an organization, in this case museum practice as a whole, and the systems and processes it has in place.

The ability to put our WHY into words provides the emotional context for decisions (Sinek 79). Knowing our WHY will help guide how we make decisions around policy as well as our everyday “best” practices. For too long museums have lost their WHY. With this out of sight our best practices have begun to prioritize all the wrong things resulting in impossible and impractical standards. Our existing HOWs have become our own obstacles. These expectations

created stressful working environments and a cultural that rejects any attempts at change. Now that we have rearticulated our WHY, we must examine our existing practices and daily work assumptions in order to create collections that are more accessible, engaging, inclusive, authentic, and relevant.

Quality Over Quantity

Some collections issues have been so chronic, so deeply ingrained and insidious that they seem almost logical; they engender tolerance, apathy, and more often paralysis among museum professionals. Lazy collections, legacy collections, strained resources, and ever-growing backlogs feed like parasites on their institutions while the pressure to keep collecting continues. The size and scale of most collections in museums has become unmanageable and despite professional guidelines, museum professionals feel powerless to solve the problems.

It is clear that current collections practices are neither healthy nor sustainable. Museum professionals carry the responsibility for decision making about collections, an investment in the outcome of these decisions, and a responsibility to the board to account for their decisions. Steketee asks if the very nature of museum collections predispose curators to decision making difficulties with regard to whether to acquire new objects and/or to part with ones already in the collection? (Steketee, *Hoarding and Museum Collections* 54). Curators and managers tend to feel pressure to keep object for the sake of the collection but when is collecting problematic?

Professional organizations like the AAM outline standards for acquisitions and accessions. Policies are necessary to ensure that collection development is planned, rational, and tied to the museum mission. However, it is rare that these policies are functional, indeed a survey found that repositories with written collecting policies were far more likely than those with informal policies to accession a collection because of a fear that the collection might be

otherwise destroyed, even though a material did not fit with their policy (Greene, Four Forceful Phrases 72).

Museums that do not see rational collection development as a major concern show that their major focus remains on their own internal preoccupations and not those of the end user: the visitor. Good collecting policies, when followed, accomplish even more than improving the selection and appraisal of objects for collecting. A formal policy helps the museum understand what it is doing and why. While planned acquisitions are less likely to cause harm to the museum organizations, unplanned or passive acquisitions are a different story. These might arrive as gifts from other organizations or individuals looking to dispose of an object they no longer want, prefer to claim as a tax write off, or perhaps earnestly believe in its significance. Such gifts pose a special challenge for the museum curator or collections manager who must make the difficult decision to accept the gift or not.

In her work, Gail Steketee takes an interesting approach and applies the criteria used to evaluate distress and impairment for individuals with hoarding disorder to museums. Just as impairment and distress constitute criteria for hoarding disorder, acquiring and organizing poses a burden to museum professionals, its resources, and available space may be considered excessive. Museum professionals are all too familiar with disorganized storage areas with piles cluttering the space making it difficult to know where a given objects is located and what it may mean. Museums may stop collecting until the existing objects are sorted and organized but if staff have no time for cataloging, inventorying, and dealing with basic collection care, this may not be enough.

Like those with hoarding disorder, museums face difficulties in struggling to keep up with the need to organize and process all of the objects in their holding. In some museums,

smaller organizations especially, objects may be piled haphazardly, and serious backlogs exist in basic cataloging, taking inventory, and physical management. This problem stems from the quantity of objects and a lack of qualified personnel to manage the load. Apart from increasing funding for staff time and storage space, solutions to these problems will need to involve a deaccessioning plan.

Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning is the permanent removal of an object or objects from a museum's collection. It can at times be controversial even though it represents good stewardship and refinement of a collection. Best practice urges museums to have policies in place that ensure the goal of removing items "is solely for the advancement of the museums mission" and that the decision-making process, disposal, and use of proceeds are clearly defined (American Alliance of Museums). However, the social and cultural expectations of museums are to protect and keep their objects in perpetuity.

As objects accumulate, their sheer number can overwhelm a museum's capacity to display and store them, not to mention the ability to organize them in a useful way that allows decision making regarding what to rotate into display and/or keep for reference. Whether or not they are actively addressing it, museums are facing an ongoing need to deaccession objects in their collection when their collections become too large or misaligned with their mission (Steketee, Hoarding and Museum Collections 57). With an ethical need to protect the public trust and legal requirements to follow proper procedures, deaccessioning is a complex challenge increasingly governed by regulations established by each individual museums and parenting organizations. While guidelines maintain a strong focus on the museum's mission when acquiring and deaccessioning, they also tend to encourage reluctance and avoidance when

deaccessioning. They encourage acquisition and retention of unwanted objects that cost time and money, removing from the collection objects that are not mission driven or not in adequate condition can be considerably more difficult than adding them (Steketee, *Hoarding and Museum Collections* 59). Ignoring the problem is a natural response to the overwhelming task of deciding what to keep and what to remove from complex collections, but ultimately it is the distress and impairment of massive holdings that force the museum's hand.

Evaluating and Changing Beliefs

An important first question is whether museum leaders and staff believe there is a collecting problem that warrants some sort of intervention. Is the museum's mission impaired? Are the exhibits, programs, and outreach efforts accomplishing their goals? If not, is a part of the problem that the sheer volume of material that staff find too large to manage distracting the institution from other important work? (Steketee, *Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections*) If the answer is yes, then strategic planning is needed to remind everyone of those values and goals that are priority for the museum, and identify potential barriers to accomplishing them. Using the parallels between hoarding disorder and museum behavior also provides strategies for addressing unhelpful beliefs that interfere with making deaccession decisions, as well as improving organizational systems.

Below are some common hoarding beliefs that frequently appear in making collections decisions:

Potential Usefulness – A common reason for keeping objects is that they are or will become “useful”. In many cases such objects often require considerable time, energy, and money to make them actually useful. The important question is whether that time, effort,

and money will truly help to achieve the organizational goals (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 122).

Perfectionism and Fear of Making Mistakes – People tend to worry about making the wrong choice: “What if I throw away something important?” (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 122). Small mistakes are considered failure, producing feelings of inadequacy and helplessness, interfering with the effort to make changes. When deaccessioning, while mistakes may happen, the top priority is to meet the organization’s most important goals, even if some mistakes occur along the way (Ibid).

Responsibility and Guilt – “If I don’t save it, who will?” is a common fear among museum professionals. While it may be true that rejecting an object may lead to its destruction, it is also likely that it would find a home in a better suited museum or repository, or perhaps that the object in question is not deserving of preservation in the first place (Greene, Four Forceful Phrases 73). Many professionals may also feel guilty when they consider downsizing their collections or not acquiring something offered to them and feel compelled to keep the object or make sure it ends up in a “good home” (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 122).

Emotional Attachment – A powerful motivator that leads people to keep objects that have little use or value (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 122). It is quite possible for collection objects to become cherished for the wrong reasons.

Control – Some people keep items simply to exercise stubborn control. The more other people complain about it and urge getting rid of things, the more they want to keep them (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 123).

Overthinking – Only when prompted by the idea to get rid of an object will people tend to think of the many different ways to use objects and the number of opportunities it could create. Such creative ideas can also prevent people from parting with items they have no intention of using anytime soon, so the objects simply contribute to clutter and confusion (Steketee, Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections 123).

Adapting strategies for people who hoard, Steketee outlines the following questions that may prove useful for examining the value and need for current objects or potential acquisitions:

1. *How many of these do we already have? Is that enough to meet our goals?*
2. *Do we have enough time to actually make it useful?*
3. *Has anyone used this in the past year?*
4. *Do we have a specific plan to use this within a reasonable timeframe?*
5. *Does this fit our mission and our current goals?*
6. *How does this compare with other objects we already have? Is the quality, accuracy, or value high enough to meet our needs?*
7. *Does this seem important just because I'm looking at it now?*
8. *If we didn't already own this, would we acquire it now?*
9. *Do we really need it?*
10. *Could we have enough space to display or store this without expanding our current footprint?*

11. Realistically, what will happen if we don't follow these "rules"? What happens?

(Steketee, *Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections* 124)

Another strategy for evaluating an object is to consider the advantages and disadvantages of keeping or acquiring it versus deaccessioning it. It would also be beneficial to consider if the desire for an object is a want or a need. Does the museum really need the object or do those making the decision just want it? Need suggests the objects will serve an active role in the organization's mission while want indicates the museum will indeed be okay without it. Lastly, Steketee proposes behavioral experiments that can help to test and objects worth. If there is fear that deaccessioning an object could be an issue, putting the object out of reach for a probationary period may help soothe concerns. After the allotted period of time, its true value can be better understood and a final decision can be made (Steketee, *Practical Strategies For Addressing Hoarding in Collections* 124).

Tiering Collections

With large and diverse collections, it can be difficult to even begin to separate the objects of significance from the mundane. Assigning a tier or ranking to each items or collection can help distinguish between the useful and not. Professionally we are trained to treat every object in a museum like they are all equally valuable: "treat every object as if it were a Rembrandt" (J. M. Vaughn 33). This idea that all collections are equal sounds fair, but museum professionals know the reality is very different. Significant items are indeed already treated different. Better display cases, handling and housing, and conservation treatment are all saved for the best. In fact, disaster plans feature lists and locations of all the most valuable items. The "Rembrandt Rule" (J. M. Vaughn), is one of the most pressing issues in collections management and directly inhibits our ability to connect our visitors with our collections. Because best practice holds that all

objects are created equal, the idea of creating a formal hierarchy of collections and using it to prioritize collections management is rarely considered.

Working with the Kentucky Historical Society, Trevor Jones began ranking their holdings into different tiers of use (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 104). The result created a blueprint for other museums to follow. Ranking resulted in better treatment for significant collections, conserved scarce resources, and even began to change how their staff and board thought about the “value” of their collections (Ibid). Unused collections are of no value to anyone, staff or visitor. Ranking these collections by importance to the museum’s mission helps ensure that only the objects that effectively engage museum visitors are collected and preserved. In this way, ranking collections acknowledges what professionals already know – that some collections are more useful than others and not everything is a Rembrandt (Ibid).

Tiering is most effective when the criteria align with the museums mission, anchoring collections to the mission helps ensure they serve an active role in the museum. Jones began tiering collections by asking “How can this help tell the stories about Kentucky’s past that will be meaningful to Kentuckians today and in the future?” of every single collection (104). Defining this question outlined their main beliefs: (1) that collections should be used and (2) that provenance was the key factor in determining importance (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 104). Other concerns like condition, function, and aesthetics played a role in ranking collections but a collections ability to tell a story to the visitor was priority. Once their criteria were established, their tiering grid was created (Table 1).

Table 1: Criteria for Tiering Collection (Jones 104)

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5
Significant to Kentucky AND nationally or internationally significant	Significant historical value to Kentucky. Strong provenance	Historical value to a location in Kentucky. Limited provenance	Historical value to other locations, no Kentucky connection	Limited or no historical value. Limited or no provenance.
Few, if any duplicates in this or other collections and/or of high monetary value	Few similar examples in this or other collections	Similar examples are held in this or other collections	Common in this or other collections	
Rare, likely irreplaceable	Uncommon and difficult to replace	Moderately difficult to replace	NA	NA
Could be used to tell multiple powerful stories about Kentucky and its place in the nation	Could be used to tell multiple stories about the state	Plays a supporting role in telling stories about the state	May play a supporting role or illustrate a concept, but it is not the focus	Plays a minor role
Example: Doram paintings – two wealthy free people of color. Deep provenance.	Example: Wm. J. Goebel’s coal – assassinated state governor. Used as trial evidence.	Example: Copper still – made in small town in eastern part of state. Confiscated in Prohibition.	Example: Flapper dress. Great condition – acquired by LOS Angeles costume designer.	Example: Woodworking planes acquired by a collector. Over 400 of them with no other info.

When tiering collections, it is important to remember that giving an object a low rank does not mean it is necessarily less useful in supporting a museum's mission. Lower ranked objects can be interesting or unique, they are merely less able to support a research or programming. As outlined in the grid, it's the top level that has the most significance when making decisions. These objects have significant provenance connected to the mission, which outweighs quantity or rarity (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 106). While the most important objects and those that clearly don't belong will be easy to rank, most collection items will end up in the middle, a determination which can be challenging.

Looking at Kentucky Historical Society's results, Tier 3 is by far the largest category consisting of over 55% of the ranked objects. Tier 1 was the smallest at 1.9%, Tier 2 nearly 8%, Tier 4 had 20%, and Tier 5 14% (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 106). Encouragingly, Jones found that over two-thirds of the entire collection had a connection to the mission, but also found it disappointing that more of it could not tell a strong story (106). Tiers 4 and 5 accounted for more than a third of the total collection, there were predominately "type" pieces with no provenance or no connection to the mission at all. Most museums will likely need some collections in the first four tiers, the distribution across these categories shows that time and money is being spent on caring for too many unneeded objects (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 107).

Benefits

Although tiering can help make deaccessioning decisions, the method itself is not a deaccessioning tool. While Tier 5 objects are reserved for collections that do not fit a museum's mission, not everything that needs to be deaccessioned will fit in Tier 5. Jones recommends creating a separate "Deaccession Yes/No" field. This will allow staff to sort both by tier and the deaccession tag to create disposal priorities (107). Creating a deaccession field will make it easy

to allow anyone working with collection to recommend an item or collection for deaccession, including staff, interns, or volunteers.

Tiering offers many benefits for the ways museum professionals can work with and understand their collections. This method can also help to illustrate gaps in the collections, and new focus areas where the museum may need to actively collect to support its mission (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 107). Indeed, this process can even help simplify disaster planning, as Tier 1 should serve as a comprehensive list of collections objects to be rescued first (Ibid).

Tiering also helps collections managers reconsider how objects are stored. It's common place in museums that storage space be mostly filled by objects that are in a drawer or cabinet because they arrived first. This means that some significant objects are stored in subpar storage areas. Jones found that many Tier 4 objects, those with no provenance, were taking up valuable storage space in the best cabinets (107). His solution was to remove the lower tier objects and switch them for higher tier objects. The best storage should be used for the objects that best support a museums mission. Tiering can help change how collection managers think about how to best use other available resources to support their collections (Jones, *Tier Your Collections* 108).

Tiering levels can be added to Collections Committee documents so that anyone recommending an object to be acquired can assign a tier as part of their recommendation. Adding tiers focuses discussions on how an acquisition can actively support a museums mission. Jones found by starting the conversation with "how will we use this" prompted staff to convince the committee to agree to an acquisition rather than forcing them to find a reason to say no (108). Committee members were less likely to accept a collection that would not actively support the mission. This is the first step in maximizing the use of collection - stop taking in things that are

not needed - and tiering collections can help with that process (Jones, Tier Your Collections 108).

It's even possible that tiering collections can change the way collection managers loan objects to other museums. In this system lower-tiered objects could be borrowed with minimal restrictions. Borrowing a tier 1 object would still require a facility report, but tier 4 could be loaned with only a one-page form and no security (Jones, Tier Your Collections 108). This approach could potentially open loan programs to a larger number of museums and increase sharing. Jones even imagines a future with a system similar to interlibrary loan for museums where it is easy to borrow common object so that not every museum needs to own encyclopedic collections with multiple examples of common objects (108). In this way we can encourage communication and cooperation among museums.

Vital Collections

In order to breathe new life into collections and see them as a contributing part of a museum, we must change our preconceived notions about the fixed nature of collections objects. Instead of constant and stable we should look to increase their flexibility and variability and see them as something vital. In her work Elizabeth Wood looks to other fields of study for inspiration to emphasize ongoing use and vitality of collections. If we begin to shift our ideas about museums and to think of collections as a part of an ecosystem, museum professionals can do a better job at maintaining collections that matter. Instead of suffering from “posterity anxiety”, where every object has potential, we should think about collections being useful and enduring (Wood, The Vital Museum Collection 63). The idea of an enduring collection does not necessarily mean the same things exist in a collection, instead a collection should reflect a cycle of appropriate objects that expand meaning, connect, purpose rather than limit it (Ibid).

Forestry

In forest management, the fundamental idea is that of perpetuation by use; here a forest is preserved by continually perpetuating it through constant decisions to add or remove material to encourage vitality (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 63). In an ideal world, collections decisions would function the same way. Our decisions would not limit the use of the collections with shortsighted concerns or by never deaccessioning. Rather we would be encouraging growth through decisions of what to keep and what to dispose of the collection is more likely to survive (Ibid).

Forest management practices are designed to maintain a strong and healthy forest. To achieve long term survival, practices like harvesting, thinning, clearcutting, and shelterwood are employed (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 64). Thinking creatively and applying these within the context of museum collections could provide the opportunity to reconsider the way we approach our holdings:

1. Harvesting – A museum’s harvesting or deaccessioning process should be focused on improving the role of the collection in relationship to the museums mission or goals. As mentioned above, it is reasonable to deaccession an object to make space for new collections, repurposing the object for broader uses like in education programs, or transferring them to another institution (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 64).
2. Thinning – Here the goal is to improve overall health and productivity by reducing competition. The implications for collections would mean freeing up valuable resources for other objects within the collection (Ibid).

3. Clearcutting – When considering clearcutting a part of a collection opening up the storage space to give more valuable collections more space is not a bad thing. Disposing of larger portions of “unhealthy” or unnecessary objects in on process could do a collection a deal of good (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 65).
4. Shelterwood Harvest – While in a forest this means the removal of mature trees, in a collection there may also be some long-admired objects whose usefulness has come and gone. Letting these objects go may free up resources and space for more meaningful objects (Ibid).

For each of these methods, the goal is to support mutual growth and enhancement of the overall experience of the collection. Practically speaking, having a productive and active collection provides the museum with greater connection to its visitors and ability to fulfill its mission (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 65).

Libraries

Looking to our colleagues in library science also provides museums with additional methods to manage our collections. For libraries, items that sit unused or unnoticed are a waste of space and budget. To address this issue, the library field uses a process called “weeding” to continually review and renew its collections materials (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 65). The key to weeding in the library is recognizing that the library is a living growing organism based on the interaction of its collections and its visitors (Ibid). The two main types of weeding rely on ongoing and constant evaluation of the use and need of the collection items. The “CREW” model (Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding) emphasizes ongoing reevaluation of materials and their use within the collection. The process integrates both acquiring new material and removal of older materials that are no longer useful. The goal here is

to collect information on the strengths and weaknesses of the collection along with gaps and saturation points to guide new acquisitions (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 66)

These methods may not be completely new to museums, but the difference is in how libraries accomplish these tasks and how they make their decisions. Using a well-developed system for tracking frequency of use, libraries are able to monitor their collections. By keeping track of what is used and when it is used, libraries are able to make informed decisions about an item that make use of their professional assessment skills and the needs of their visitors (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 66).

A key component of weeding is the “MUSTIE” factor, whose principles further emphasize the relevance of the collection to the mission and purpose of the institution. MUSTIE stands for: Misleading, Ugly, Superseded, Trivial, Irrelevant to the community, and Elsewhere (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 66). Applying these characteristics to museum collections is a useful exercise:

Misleading – In a museum collection, misleading objects might be things that are lacking information or whose information may not be verifiable, they might be poor in quality, under-researched, or simply misleading as to the museum’s purpose.

Ugly – There may be certain reasons to consider the aesthetics of an object. If an object is not appealing or lacks the potential to peak a visitor’s interest, it is liable it will never be displayed.

Superseded – This might refer to duplicates of the same object in different states of condition or number similar objects with various levels of provenance.

Trivial – Is an idea that reflects a fad or trend that is no longer popular. It's reasonable that museums would document certain fads in history, but there should still be a clear and focused reason or purpose to these collections (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 67). It may also be possible to examine trends in the institutions collecting habits that may not be relevant anymore.

Irrelevant – The more room museums can make on their shelves for objects that represent the members of their changing community and their experiences, the more valuable the collection will become. This means that museums must be able to define, understand, and reflect their communities.

Elsewhere – Especially relevant to smaller institutions, local museums should keep and maintain only what is unique and specific to their missions, expecting museums to retain the same kinds of things is problematic. Sharing collections, and knowing who has what and where, would alleviate some of the biggest challenges in collections management (Wood, *The Vital Museum Collection* 67).

The value in these library methods is focusing on how weeding leads to greater use of the materials that remain. If museums are to hold objects that are not useful, then what is the point of our institutions. Museum collections can be powerful connectors to the human story, but only when they are used effectively.

Means to An End

Cataloging Methods

In the face of ever-growing backlogs, we must ask ourselves if our methods may also be an issue. Simply put, our cataloging methods are struggling to keep up with our acquisitions,

resulting in inaccessible collections across the country. Cataloging and backlog projects tend to become the focus of funding projects but are we wasting scarce resources because we are spending too much time on tasks that do not need doing, or at least need doing all the time? As collections management methods evolve, we need to be careful not to merely replace one set of processing methods with another equally limiting system. We need to ask better questions of our methods, to better appreciate the consequences of our daily decisions, to understand and apply real world economics, and to distinguish what we really need to do from what we only believe we need to do (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 209).

There are several long-standing problems with our best practices and as a profession we have been unwilling or unable to change in response to the greater quantities of acquisitions coming into our museums. We have continued to apply traditional approaches to new problems despite the handicaps they impose. We seem to perpetuate our traditional ways for the sake of our institutional egos which award a higher priority to serving the needs of our collection objects than to serving the needs of our visitors. A demand for “comprehensive accessibility” is common in the United Kingdom, but the United States lags behind (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 212). The improved access for visitors and users is an important issue, it is underpinned by the need to address cataloging backlogs which restrict access to collections they wish to access (Ibid).

Professionally we need to rearticulate a new set of cataloging and preservation guidelines. Greene and Meissner propose four criteria for archivists that have implications for other collecting organizations:

1. To get collection materials into the hands of users as fast as possible

2. To make adequate arrangement of materials to support user needs.
3. To take minimal steps necessary for physical preservation
4. To describe materials sufficiently to promote use. (212-213)

In this way we can focus on what we absolutely need to do, instead of on all the things we might do in a potential better funded future. Collections that have been acquired but never cataloged are as unavailable to visitors and users as objects that have been destroyed. We need to focus on a balance between the needs of the user and the reality of our limited resources, these will determine the level of detail needed to make inaccessible collections accessible.

These few basic principles support the guidelines mentioned above and serve the primary goal of maximizing user access. First, what Greene and Meissner call “the golden minimum”, the goal should be to maximize the accessibility of collections for visitors (240). Other objectives should be aimed at achieving this overarching goal, instead of competing with it. What is the least we can do to get the job done in a way that is adequate to users’ needs, now and in the future (Ibid)?

Second, cataloging and preservation work should be done in harmony. Tension between housekeeping needs and user needs must be resolved, we cannot continue to let noble preservation goals undermine our goal of accessibility and use. Our traditional practices stress the importance of micro level preservation yet with today’s technology objects can be managed by controlling the storage environment on a macro level, without such an intensive work on a microlevel. This means that we can rely on our storage area environment control to carry the weight of the preservation burden. Professionals do not need to rehouse objects unless the object is in poor condition or the collection is highly valuable (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 251). Procedures like this should

become exceptions rather than rules. Collection materials should be screened during acquisition or accessioning to make sure there are no pressing issues (Ibid). Barring any extreme preservation issues, professionals should be able to avoid any further preservation work. As discussed above, not every object in a collection needs to be handled the same way, not everything is a Rembrandt (J. M. Vaughn). Making collections accessible is more important than a uniformly clean and tidy collection. By taking this wider perspective a tremendous amount of time and money can be saved handling our objects, and we can make real progress in reducing our backlogs (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 252).

A final principle is inspired by Roger Needham's statement that "good research is done with a shovel, not tweezers: you should find an area where you can get a lot out of it fast (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 240)." Collection's processing should be done just as efficiently. Professionally we should be paying more attention to achieving basic physical and intellectual control over, and with it increasing access to, all of our holdings, instead of processing a few of them to perfection (Greene and Meissner, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing* 237).

Traditional cataloging and preservation methods cannot keep up with modern acquisitions. We need to adapt to our existing resources and change the way we process our collections. Of course, exceptional collections deserve more meticulous processing, but these collections are by definition exceptions. This simple shift in practice can refocus the profession back to the use of collections and getting objects in front of visitors.

Rethinking Descriptions

In light of our new understanding of the meaning of objects, our current system of classifying museum collections is also in need of changing. Our traditional methods do not address questions surrounding an object's meaning for the visitor, the connections it makes between viewer and the object itself on a visceral and intellectual level, and the narratives the visitor may bring to the experience. Instead, classifying and description methods have been grounded in academic practices and have been designed to meet the needs of scholars and academically trained curators, registrars, archivists, and librarians (Bourcier 110). These professions seek to gain intellectual control over the collections by categorizing and indexing them in ways meant to be useful to researchers based on academic ideas of importance (Ibid).

Catalog records are filled with terminology used to describe the objects physically, the functions they originally served, and the context of time, place, and people with which the objects are associated. These classifications are useful, but they do little to help us explain what these things really mean to our visitors (Bourcier 110). As we explored above, the dimensions of a person's lifeworld and an object's objectworld are in a constant state of flux, producing varying meaning from encounter to encounter. This idea of changeable meaning creates problems for our typical cataloging systems as they are based on cataloging the object's original function and do not allow for flexibility. If our goal is to have active, engaging collections, we must expand our means of classification to include the potential they hold. Museum objects are cultural resources that serve a variety of purposes and a variety of audiences, our cataloging should acknowledge these facts (Bourcier 111).

Bourcier offers three concepts regarding the description and classification of collections and examines how new practices can allow us to catalog our visitors meaning making:

1. *Considering the roles that collections play in fulfilling our museums mission and meeting new audiences.*
2. *Adding new ways to describe objects that go beyond intellectual access and explore the collections impact on emotion and behavior.*
3. *Sharing the task of describing and classifying collections with the audiences who provide meaning. (111)*

First, the ways we currently classify and catalog collections provides a standardized language and order useful for researchers but this system doesn't serve museum visitors who don't interact with objects the same way. As our profession looks to share authority and pursue civic engagement, our collections need to be described in terms that more effectively address the value they have for our audiences (Bourcier 112). In our new paradigm, museums help the public constructs a meaningful narrative rather than impose a narrative on them. Professionally, if we want to classify collections by the meaning they have, we need to remember the potential objects have to generate transformative experiences. As we've seen, objects inspire, stimulate emotions and ideas, evoke awe and wonder, and make the experiences of others real and tangible (Bourcier 112).

Building on this point, our adaptive collections classifications can also take into account the feelings objects evoke. Bourcier references the National Museum of American History display of objects from the 9/11 terrorist attack. Here a flight crew log from United Airlines Flight 93, a sign from the World Trade Center, and a door from a Brooklyn fire truck were displayed, not with the intention of relaying historical commentary but to stimulate personal memories (113). The Smithsonian recognized the affective and cognitive value of their objects, merely classifying these objects functionality fails to address their emotional impact. As a

profession, if we can attempt to classify collections by the emotions they inspire in our visitors, we may get closer to finding relevance and value for our visitors (Ibid). This does, however, bring up concerns as to who has the authority to assign these additional classifications, the curator or the audiences who experience them?

We've seen that collections have the ability to impact behavior in our visitors. In her book, *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon introduces her concept of "social objects" – museum objects that inspire conversation (Simon). These types of objects are incredibly valuable to visitors, but it raises the question as to how we can classify objects with this potential. Referencing the four categories of social objects Simon had proposed, Bourcier suggests using these classifications as a framework for describing museum collections that provoke interaction:

1. Active – Objects in motion, those objects whose operation create a shared experience for visitors.
2. Provocative – Objects that stimulate conversation because they are surprising to the visitors who encounter them.
3. Relational – Objects that encourage interpersonal use, those that require multiple people to function or be understood.
4. Personal – Objects in museums that trigger personal connections. (Simon; Bourcier 114)

Given the dynamic nature of objects and their varying meaning for and effect on visitors, it becomes clear that museums do not have the only authoritative voice in contextualizing objects (Bourcier 115). Our traditional methods of object classification may provide intellectual access to the stories objects hold but we need to find a more effective means of describing and categorizing objects by the emotions and connections they have the potential to inspire (Ibid). When we focus only on materiality, original function, and original context of an objects original

users and makers, we unintentionally limit our ability to connect our collections to our audiences while simultaneously uphold the notion that the power to define an object's meaning rest with museum professionals alone (Ibid).

Looking back to The Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories* exhibit, where visitors were encouraged to record their own personal perspective on objects from the collection, opens up a world of potential. What if we added these perspectives to the catalog records? Then museum professionals could classify those stories along with an object's record, creating a catalog that focused on relationships and emotions (Bourcier 116). Indeed, The Philadelphia Museum of Art is already adopting this bottom-up concept of folk taxonomy (Ibid). The PMA now allows visitors to its website catalog to add their own social tags, these tags reflect personal connections, categories, and concepts that are meaningful and relevant to the individual (Ibid).

Traditional methods of contextualizing and classifying museum objects play only a small role in meaning making, the rest comes from thoughts, feelings, and actions of our audiences when they encounter museum collections and the stories they document, illustrate, and make tangible (Bourcier 116). As a profession we must understand and reexamine our assumptions about our visitors' experiences and sharing authority of our collection's catalogs. A new classification system has the potential to drastically change our visitors' interaction with museum collections, increasing the relevancy of the objects and institutions alike.

New Collections

Constructivist Collections

Visitors, and most professionals, don't realize just how interpretive an act acquiring objects can be. This process has always prioritized one object over another, one version of

history, science, or art, over another. We tend to believe that we collect objectively, but we are not objective nor are we omniscient. As we acknowledge that knowledge is shifting and conditional, how do we do justice to the subjectiveness of knowledge as it reflects itself in our objects? How do museums build collections that show just how multidimensional objects can be? How should museums collect for a constructivist world, where knowledge isn't collected and kept but made and remade (Filene 130)? Constructivism posits that people construct their own knowledge and that reality is the sum of your learning experiences. Reflecting the Wood and Latham's understanding of the Object Knowledge Framework, in a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not limited but is shaped through a myriad of decisions by content-producers (museums) and then filtered through the learner's own experiences, interests, attention, and prior knowledge (Filene 131). The challenge for museums is to resolve our collecting practices with our new understanding of knowledge.

Moving past the myth of objectivity we can see our collections for what they are: "partial, historically contingent assemblages that reflect the tastes and interests of both the time and individuals who made them" (Merriman 3). Releasing the pressure of collecting objects for permanence's sake frees us to focus on the here and now. We can move past the encyclopedic completest collections of the past and create vibrant constructivist collections instead. Filene outlines four categories of objects a constructivist collection might contain:

1. Storytelling objects – Constructivist collections allow for interpretations and depend on an object's ability to communicate stories to the visitor. Story driven collections prioritize the human dimension of museums and their objects (Filene 133). By focusing on the story an object contains we also send the message that museums are selective, an identical looking object may not impart the same story as another. In this way looking for

objects that help museums tell stories provides the framework for an organization to pick one object over another. The stories, however, will depend on the museum and its mission and of course the moment in which we live (Ibid).

2. **Invented Objects** – Because constructivist collecting involves telling stories around objects, it also opens up the potential for the opposite: constructing objects to represent a story (Filene 134). Assembling collections for the purposes of an exhibition demonstrates museums' ability to shape and interpret stories.
3. **Multivalent Objects** – Building on storytelling objects, another option are those objects that relay multiple points of view (Filene 135). These demonstrate yet another way meaning is not eternal nor universal and that significance depends on the viewer. By bringing attention to the contingency of interpretations demonstrates that different objects have different meanings in different context (Ibid). This even allows museums to acknowledge when a point of view is missing.
4. **Pre-constructed Objects** – These are a special category of objects that are assemblages, objects that people collected in the past to represent something, someone, or themselves. These collections are not about the individual objects but about the collective interpretation they represent (Filene 136). This classification could indeed be applied to museum collections as a whole. By acknowledging the constructed nature of our collections, we can impart on our visitors that our holdings have their own history, influenced by people with preferences and agendas (Filene 137).

It should be noted that embracing the idea of collecting as a subjective practice raises concerns about the process of collecting. From this perspective, whoever makes the collecting decisions is an interpretative decision unto itself (Filene 138). In the constructivist museum, a

curator's personal background and perspectives are not ignored, they provide an opportunity for access and understanding. For example, the crisis of a lack of minority representation within the museum profession is not new, and it is not only an issue of equity but an interpretive obstacle as well. We need to remember the importance of hearing multiple voices and viewpoints. An inclusive conversation about perspective and priorities is a major part of what museums can offer, the legacy of these conversations is what we pass on to the future in our collections (Ibid).

The goal of a constructivist curator and collection would be to facilitate conversations about interpretation and representation. This aim reflects an awareness of our limits as collectors and an expanded sense of our possibilities (Filene 138). By collecting additional perspectives, we can recognize that museums have no monopoly on history. In this way community collaborations and visitor participation are not gimmicks but genuine opportunities (Ibid).

It is important to note that the constructivist collection does not mean there are no rules: choices still matter, meaning is still made, some facts are objectively true, and some "facts" are not. Constructivist collections require clarity about how objects hold meaning and when they do not (Filene 139). The future of museums depends on embracing the idea that objects do not have inherent significance but instead communicate the interpretations we imbue them with. In the constructivist museum, professionals must acquire objects that hold that interpretive weight, the objects that allow multiple meanings and juxtaposed perspectives (Ibid). Museums need to offer vibrant, multi-layered stores that allow challenging interpretations and empower visitors to join the conversation as their own interpreters (Ibid). This work makes museums more essential now than ever before and offers a chance to rewrite our practices for future generations of professionals.

Objects and People

As we shift our focus from objects to objects and people it creates the opportunity to build relationships with the people in our community. To achieve this goal, we must first learn to understand our visitors' needs just as well as we understand the needs of our collections. What do people need from museums? According to Tisdale there are several needs including the need to nurture our whole selves and the need for equity.

Nurturing the Whole Self

Museums are uniquely positioned to develop the creative thinking skills people need to thrive in a modern, ever changing world. Our world is full of complexity and challenges, and the solution comes when people apply everything they have – their knowledge and skills, but also their passion, empathy, creativity, spirituality, vulnerability, and commitment to something bigger themselves, the greater good, to help solve the complex, deeply entrenched problems of our global society (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 27). We need people to bring this, their whole selves, into everyday life.

We tend to think of the key parts of the self in simple terms: body, mind, and spirit. Tisdale instead proposes museums think of the self in a more complex manner, she provides a framework of nine spheres of the unique self: the learning self, the embodied self, the feeling self, the social self, the creative self, the civic self, the spiritual self, the playful self, and the vulnerable self (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 28). This perspective relates to the Unity of the Moment proposed by Latham in which a total holistic and dynamic experience where everything – emotion, intellect, feeling senses, and imagination – comes together for the visitor in a unifying burst of clarity (Latham). Typically, in our society these aspects of ourselves are

compartmentalized, but museums allow for a more flexible, informal, and immersive environment (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 28). In this way museums are positioned to attend to the whole self in a way that other social institutions are not.

Museum professionals can use their resources, including collections, to create opportunities for more than self-directed learning they can create the opportunity for self-guided development of the whole self. As a field we must recognize how these aspects of the self-work together within a museum context. Should we continue to experiment with methods for integrating these layers we might just find the phenomenon we have been trying to produce – unity of the moment, peak experience, the aha moment – was always one of briefly being whole (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 29).

It is useful then to consider how our holdings can better contribute to the whole-self experience. Take for example the Rubin Museum's Dream-Over program. This program invites members to spend the night in the museums dreaming about an object in the collection. Participants fill out a questionnaire that allows museum staff to match them with one of the objects on display. During the night they draw the objects, listen to stories chosen for them, learn contextual information about dreams, their object, and Buddhist culture, and sleep next to the object overnight (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 29). In the morning psychoanalysts help them to journal their dreams and lead a small group discussion to process them (Ibid). This program perfectly captures the integration of the nine spheres of the self into a vibrant and memorable experience. Imagine the potential to increase the value of a museum's collections for the visitors we serve if we actively and intentionally consider an object's potential to address more than educational needs: healing, self-reflection, social bridging, activism, and creative problem solving (Ibid).

If museums aim is to provide collections that support visitors' whole self-development, Tisdale proposes that we might ask the following questions of our objects when we are making decision about acquisition, preservation, use, and deaccession:

- *How might this object be a tool for the whole-self – to feed and restore the body or the heart; to inspire conscientious civic engagement; to encourage social bonding and bridging, play, creativity, or spiritual reflection?*
- *What is this object's potential to be a prescription? A touchstone? A divining rod? A light bulb?*
- *Do our museums methods – the collections database; the acquisition, the research, and exhibition development process – allow for holistic exploration of our collection, or do they favor the cognitive self above all other spheres of operation?*
- *How concentrated is human meaning in this object?*
- *Is this object here merely because it is the best thing, we have found so far to fill a gap in the encyclopedia or is it here because it has poetic possibility?*
- *How might we share our collection poetically, seeking out the most interesting or compelling objects and combining them in surprising and powerful ways? (29, 31)*

Opportunities for Equity

It may seem that building a more equitable society is a job for other aspects of our society, but museums have a share in the right and responsibility of this work. Indeed, this work may weigh more heavily on institutions like museums who have a history of elitism and wealth accumulation and with individuals much like museum professionals who have benefitted from this privilege. Collecting for early cabinets of curiosity was not only an exhaustive scientific process, there were also cultural and political implications. Early museums demonstrated and

validated European beliefs that knowledge is embedded in organized material and that material displays create knowledge and articulate social relationships. Their displays evolved from wall-to-wall rooms of random objects to cases of objects laid out in an order meant to depict increasing complexity, to dioramas which contextualized objects, rendering impressions of other cultures as exotic and primitive (Momaya 15). Collecting from the farthest reaches of the world was a fundamental element of the crafting the grand narrative of European supremacy.

By cementing these notions through material displays museums not only legitimized colonization, but through the very act of collecting itself, they became its agents. They help to define political boundaries and influence the worldviews of their visitors (Momaya 15). Modern museum practices have also been called into question by communities that often found themselves pillaged, exoticized, stereotyped, and disparaged by museums. As a profession we must ask ourselves what messages are we sending when our museums are filled with objects of power, framed through the lens of privilege (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 22)? The answer is quite simple, we are saying this place is not for you. Museums continue to alienate people they claim within their public audience while insisting that the promises they made to previous generations of privileged people – the promise to preserve their objects – takes precedence over the right to equity, respect, and welcome that every human being deserves from our public institutions (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 22).

Criticisms are not new, inequity in collections has been a topic of discussion since the middle of the 20th century. Most museums addressed the issue by attempting to acquire some objects that represent marginalized people, provided their bursting storage and scarce resources would allow it. However, they also continued to collect objects of privilege from wealthy White donors, without actually challenging their museum's role in a larger social system that values

White people's stuff and stories over others (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 22). With this in mind, it may even be ethical to deaccession significant portions of the objects of privilege currently held by museums in an effort to make space and free up resources for collections that serve the marginalized in our society.

Deaccessioning legacy collections and actively collecting objects that better represent marginalized communities is but one way museum professionals can create equity in our institutions. As social discourse continues to spotlight inequality and museums' supremacist history, we must ask ourselves how we can do our work in a more conscientious way. Momaya offers a number of principles for an anti-racist approach to collections. The first is to openly acknowledge legacies of colonialism, racism, oppressions, distortion, and theft that helped found museums across the world (16). If museums intend to keep and display problematic collections, is it imperative that we stay transparent and respectful regarding their origins. This includes initiating conversations between museums and affected communities about sharing artifacts and possibly repatriating them and/or using revenues generated from related exhibitions to help build institutions and qualified personnel to show, share, and possibly repatriate these objects in their place of origin (Ibid). The aim is not to dispose of or hide these collections but instead engage with them in a critical way to create opportunities for reflective and conscientious museum practices.

Conscientious collections practice should go hand in hand with community engagement. Co-Constructing meaning and destabilizing the idea of one group's authority over the narratives we find in objects is an important way forward. Museum professionals are already being trained in social movements, becoming more mindful of identity politics and the politics of representation. We must strive to give voice to subjects and enable participatory decision making

in interpretations. Sharing authority is a more effective means to create and guide culture than institutional control (Momaya 17). To this point it is also important for museums to encourage dissensus, or as many divergent perspectives as possible, around an object or collection. To support this goal, a community of interpretation should be built with an intentional diversity of voices; collections then can be thought of as opportunities for relationship building and ongoing dialogue rather than possession (Ibid).

Public Feelings

Blending the notions of the emotional effect of museums along with an awareness of larger social issues, Labode's concept of public feelings looks at the complex emotions expressed in public spaces that emerge in response to social, political, and economic events or factors (36). The concept provides another way to examine the emotional resonance of museum collections and understand if and how objects are truly useful. This emotional context is another example of a fundamental element of an object that should be documented and made accessible to those that engage with the object.

Public feelings are not universal, they are products of specific cultural, historical, political, and economic factors (Labode 37). In this way understanding the larger context in which they appear is essential. By understanding public feelings, museum professionals can find ways to animate objects by acknowledging the unquestioned assumptions we have about material culture, bring hidden meanings to light, or propose alternative interpretation of an objects significance (Ibid). Historically museums perpetuated the notion of a single story, a single perspective or version of events. Public feelings are by definition about multiplicity. Recognizing the public feelings associated with an object, how they change based on context, can help professionals introduce opportunities for complexity and empathy in the process (Labode 38).

Labode uses the example of an otherwise mundane every-day object like a Mother Hubbard dress to demonstrate how the history of an object along with the public feelings associated with it open interpretive possibilities (38). These dresses, popular among 19th century white women, were spread to indigenous woman by missionaries from the United States and Europe. Indigenous women across North America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific even altered the western style with local materials. This alone introduces the public feelings around gender, class, race, and location (Labode 40). By the 20th century the feelings toward the dress in the West had shifted, they were now perceived to be wore only by poor, uncouth, and possibly immoral women, introducing feelings of shame and judgement. By World War I, African American women in Detroit would try to convince new migrants from the South to stop wearing the dress, they perceived it to be a backward and feared it gave Whites a bad impression, introducing fear and racial self-consciousness (Ibid). In contrast, in other areas of the world that same dress became a sign of resilience and an adaptable indigenous culture (Ibid). Throughout history and across locations the same dress conjures up vastly different emotions yet that same dress in a conventional museum database description would all read the same, providing little insight into its significance.

As depicted the interpretive possibilities of objects dramatically increases when the museum has access to resources to consider objects in both a larger historical context and in terms of the public feelings associated with them. Public feelings and their context can make collections more active by bringing to light hidden emotions and provoking creative, unsettling questions.

Providing access to public feelings creates a tension between continuing current museum practices and making intentional changes that would make collections more engaging to visitors

and more socially relevant. It is important for professionals to understand the consequences of telling a single story about collection objects, consequences which usually reinforce dominant narrative and diminish relevancy of the object and the museum (Labode 44). By including public feelings in our interpretation, museum professionals can unlock alternative narratives contained in objects, even the everyday objects already in our storage rooms may holding more compelling stories than we realized.

A conscientious collections approach makes repatriation and deaccessioning a viable option in collections policies along with loaning objects to community-based museums (Momaya 18). Museums can get possessive about their objects, not wanting to let go of them, yet these objects were never really “theirs” to begin with. Initially acquired by theft, these objects are in the wrong institutions and would be better valued, contextualized, and used by other organizations, especially those within their originating community. It should be best practice for museum professionals to be regularly reevaluating whether something should be collected, and whether existing objects should be kept or repatriated, deaccessioned, or otherwise disposed of. Regarding collecting, Tisdale refers to Paul Van de Larr’s concepts of nostalgia heritage and bonding heritage (Van de Larr, Tisdale 23). Nostalgia heritage refers to collections that reinforce privilege, nostalgia here makes people feel special but at the expense of others. Bonding heritage are collections that make space for everyone. These collections recognize that marginalized people care about their community, they want to know it, find their place, and make it their home. Conventional versions of history when framed through the lens of privilege holds little meaning for them and outright excludes them. Consider all the different ways inclusion and exclusion can be seen: race, ability, sexuality, gender expression, politics, religion, and more. Expanding on the idea of bonding heritage offers museum professionals the chance to see the

possibility of collections that nurture equity and common ground instead of collections that reinforce a hierarchy of privilege (Tisdale, *Objects or People?* 23).

If museums aim to provide equity to visitors, Tisdale proposes that we might ask the following questions when we are making decision about acquisition, preservation, use, and deaccession:

- *Does this object – or its presentation – reinforce a system of inequality, colonialism, or privilege?*
- *Are we using this object for bonding or nostalgia?*
- *Are decisions about what we take and keep made exclusively by people of privilege?*
- *Is the presence of this object in our collection worth alienating another human being, or undermining another human being's value?*
- *How might we use this object to reinforce a system of equity, welcome, and mutual respect? (23)*

It also serves museums to consider just how useful digital tools and social media can be in shifting the balance of power and voice around collections (Momaya 18). Reaching larger, more diverse groups of people and encouraging conversations around objects and collections makes our holdings all the more accessible. The internet allows people from a variety of backgrounds to engage with collections, learn about them, comment on them, and redefine interpretations. They open doors for museums to reach people they never have before.

In order for a conscientious collections approach to be truly affective it must be situated in the larger context of progressive, activist beliefs and policies throughout the museum practice; this includes curating, visitor engagement, education, marketing and communications,

fundraising, and management. Change does not occur in a vacuum. There must be buy-in at every level of the museum in order for these approaches to truly be affective.

Conclusion

As the world around us changes, so too must museums. Plagued by systemic issues and institutional egos, museums have lost sight of what's important, lost sight of what makes them unique. Professionalization within the field and an increased focus on visitor experience has segregated collection objects and rendered them inaccessible, by visitors and professionals alike. The future of museums lies in remembering the significance of our collection objects. We must remember that it is the union of people's experiences and the unique characteristics of objects that form the foundation of a unified experience that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Experience and meaning making do not occur without objects, nor is it collections that create the museum experience alone. While the essence of an object may be incomplete without a person to experience it, a vibrant visitor experience is dependent on a person's object encounter. It is the bringing together of people *and* objects that is the basis for the visitor's experience; it is the why museums exist. Embracing this dependency can help museum professionals foster connections between their objects and their visitors.

Museum professionals that can unlock this key aspect of the visitor's encounter with objects can enhance their ability to make meaning from the experience and make objects matter. Professionally we must remember our WHY. Objects are the focal point for bring ideas, thoughts, and meaning together in the same place. They allow a person to create meaning in the world. We've explored a myriad of ways objects can affect people, and the relationships people form with them. It is clear that museums and their objects are not just educational or recreational, they are a place for these moving encounters and the exchange of the unified experience.

As the traditionally defined role of museums comes into question, there is a great benefit to understanding this purpose. It offers us the potential to create better means of using our resources and expertise to better contribute to society as a whole. This is, however, dependent on setting aside our professional egos and our servitude to collections for collections sake. For too long museums have treated their collections as an end in and of themselves. Tidying objects on shelves, restricting access, meticulous cataloging, specialized preservation techniques, and taking pride in the growing numbers of objects rather than the growing numbers of visitors and users. We know that our organizations cannot continue to justify preservation for preservations sake with ever dwindling resources. A professional reassessment is needed, or we will merely end up with storage rooms full of objects that no body actually uses. We must remember that we exist for people and not for objects alone – our professional aim needs to be serving people not our collections. We do this by collecting and protecting the right objects; by maintaining vital, diverse collections; by making objects and their diverse stories accessible; by getting them in front of our visitors and into the hands of users.

We must examine our “best practices” and reconsider our daily work assumptions. To increase access and use we must analyze what is on our shelves, assess those that support our mission and the needs of our visitors, those objects that do not belong must go, freeing space and resources for a more active, accessible, inclusive, and authentic collections. The forgotten mission of collections is to be used and to be useful. Everything a museum does should be supporting this goal. If use is not the end of our efforts, then what have we been collecting all these things for (Greene, *Four Forceful Phrases* 80)? “We are keepers with a purpose and that purpose is not keeping but using” (Birchford 14).

Remembering our WHY allows for more flexible and innovative practices and processes. The need for inclusivity, community connections, and compelling storytelling has never been more important. In an environment of declining funding, limited storage, and understaffed organizations with an increasing amount of material to collect, it is important that we collect smartly and manage our resources carefully (Irwin and Whitaker 151). By choosing materials that are relevant and representative of today's changing communities can better our institutional reputation and lay a foundation of better practice for future generations. We must reassess our collections, increase collaboration, diversify our objects and their interpretation, and make information more accessible. By doing so, we can demonstrate that our collections, and our museums are an essential public service.

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