

What If There Are Five Sides to the Story? Interpreting Multiple Viewpoints with Integrity

reported by Arthur H. Wolf

The public relies on museums to tell authentic stories including those dealing with controversial topics and contested history. Sometimes this expectation is expressed as "telling both sides of the story." What if there are more than two sides? A session at the 2005 WMA meeting in Pasadena explored the ways that four very different museums have interpreted multiple viewpoints in their exhibits and programs, with examples of how they address difficult questions for the benefit of their audiences.

Presenters covered guidance for their approaches, points of view, main voices, reactions, lessons, and principles involved for their institutions, which represent global, hemispheric, national and regional missions. Main points are listed below:

William G. Johnson

Director, Atomic Testing Museum

Weapons of mass destruction are controversial - whether they represent a history or a threat today. The Atomic Testing Museum (ATM) has greeted the controversial history with open arms. Two examples are notable:

◆ Demonstrators from the Nevada Desert Experience gathered at the Museum's Grand Opening last February. Approximately 60 protesters carrying anti-nuke signs and messages were welcomed by museum staff. They were encouraged to participate in the Opening activities without provocation. In addition, the staff requested that their protest signs be donated for the Museum's permanent collection at the end of day. Months later, this dialogue led to the two organizations working together to host Japanese visitors on their way to New York to support the Non-proliferation Treaty. The dialogue continues today.

◆ Shortly after the Museum's Grand Opening, a group known as Downwinders United sent out a press release that argued that the Museum had not featured those Americans harmed by the fallout from nuclear testing. Media inquiries quickly followed. The Museum's director provided the media with first-hand views of the content about downwinders and welcomed the Downwinders to see the museum for themselves. This initiated a dialogue and an agreement to work together to develop a proposal for a traveling exhibit. A draft of an NEH proposal was created. The two organizations identified several key issues

that need to be resolved and plan to work through them in order to submit the proposal in 2006.

The ATM recognizes that controversy must be acknowledged immediately. Those who feel harmed or marginalized by this history must be welcomed. In addition, the Museum's stance is to explore avenues to include the disassociated, thus providing a win-win solution.

Bruce Bernstein

Assistant Director for Cultural Resources, National Museum of the American Indian

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is dedicated to working in collaboration with the indigenous peoples of the Americas to foster and protect Native cultures throughout the Western Hemisphere. This is done specifically by advancing – in consultation, collaboration and cooperation with Natives – knowledge and understanding of Native cultures including art, history and language.

In the development of Way of the People, the architectural program for the new NMAI facility which opened last year, five principles were highlighted:

- 1) Spiritual focus/symbolic reality: all things/beings are alive; organic nature of life
 - ◆ Physical building is not as important as what is inside
 - ◆ Objects are living
- 2) Interrelationships of all life forms; integration of activities and disciplines
 - ◆ Museum is part of world/community
 - ◆ Incorporate seasons/directions in physical space
 - ◆ Objects must be contextualized
 - ◆ Non-hierarchical ordering of objects and people - museum for all people
- 3) Relative Truth - believe in multi-universe
 - ◆ Interpretations are complex and multiple
 - ◆ History is relative
- 4) Focus on Wholes/Context, Inclusive of all
 - ◆ Objects contextualized
 - ◆ Collecting to provide cultural meaning
 - ◆ Communities important

continued on next page...

“FIVE SIDES TO THE STORY...”

...continued from previous page

5) Past is part of Present and Future; Time is Continuous Flow of Life; Time is Cyclic

- ◆ Present Indian life and communities of today
- ◆ Objects are presented in the continuum of life

Examples highlighted in the slide presentation included the participation of diverse communities in the NMAI grand opening, consultation sessions with community members throughout the hemisphere, and public response to exhibits and educational activities.

Sojin Kim

Curator, Japanese American National Museum

The Japanese American National Museum developed out of a grassroots process that initially involved people who were not museum professionals. It was established to document, preserve, and share the experiences of Japanese Americans and through this to expand mainstream understanding of American history. An integral part of this process has involved presenting and preserving materials and stories that demonstrate the depth, complexity, and diversity of Japanese American populations.

In our programs, we are concerned with communicating the fact that there is no singular or monolithic Japanese American "community"—people of Japanese ancestry represent diverse experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, we don't think about the idea of community in relation to Japanese Americans as something circumscribed by race or blood or ethnicity—stories and experiences of non-Japanese Americans are also an important part of Japanese American history.

We approach many of our programs through collaborations with organizations and individuals outside of the museum. Underlying most everything we do is an emphasis on collecting and representing first-person perspectives.

These approaches and assumptions reflect a commitment to highlighting multiple perspectives and experiences, and to challenging

a perception of an "ethnic community" that is homogeneous, unified in intent and experience.

The two ways in which our exhibitions reflect multiple viewpoints are:

- 1) Literally or directly – we have juxtaposed differing or contesting perspectives in exhibit displays;
- 2) The very processes of exhibition development and interpretation are informed by the views, experiences, predispositions of multiple parties – including community advisors, scholars, partner organizations, artifact lenders and donors, curators, volunteer docents, and even visitors

Examples highlighted in the slide presentation included the exhibits *Common Ground: The Heart of Community*; *Big Drum: Taiko in the United States*; *Fighting for Democracy: Who is the 'We' in 'We the People'?*; and *Object Lessons: Exploring the Permanent Collections*.

Forrest Rodgers

President, The High Desert Museum

What happens when one of the voices is silent? This is the challenge faced by The High Desert Museum, which interprets the natural and cultural history of the eight-state intermountain west through exhibits, animal habitats, interpretive programs and living history, and public programs.

Founded in the late 1970s to provide "natural resource education for the public ... not available through existing institutions," the Museum grew to become an accredited "living museum of man and natural history ... stimulating responsible decision-making on natural resource and land management issues."

In the future, the Museum will increase its living collection and expand living history programs within an overarching theme: People have changed, been changed by, and continue to change the High Desert landscape.

While planning for its third decade, the Museum asked three essential questions: Who speaks for the High Desert landscape? Who speaks for the region's wildlife? And, how do we connect people (our audiences) to them, in ways that help them understand their responsibility to the future?

By their nature, the Museum's raptors, small mammals, reptiles, and insects exhibit behavior that is both entertaining and engaging for visitors of all ages. Animals become a gateway for learning about the necessity of healthy habitats, thereby helping audiences better understand the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems on the landscape.

...continued from page 10

The intended outcome is that visitors leave the Museum with a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of the landscape and the animals and people who call it home. If we are successful, this will inspire stewardship of natural and cultural resources in the High Desert - but also in ones own backyard and neighborhood.

Topics covered in the Q&A at the end of the session included: the need to get beyond things to the contexts behind them; the search for balance in programming and relevance to permanent societal values; contrast of individual experiences with overall histories; thematic interpretation; and the establishment of trust, integrity and consistency in approaches to interpreting multiple viewpoints.

Arthur H. Wolf moderated the session “What If There Are Five Sides to the Story? Interpreting Multiple Viewpoints with Integrity” and coordinated this article. He is the principle of WOLF Consulting, wolfconsulting@cox.net