Narratives in History Museums – Reflections and Perspectives

Edited by Gaby Sonnabend and Guy Thewes

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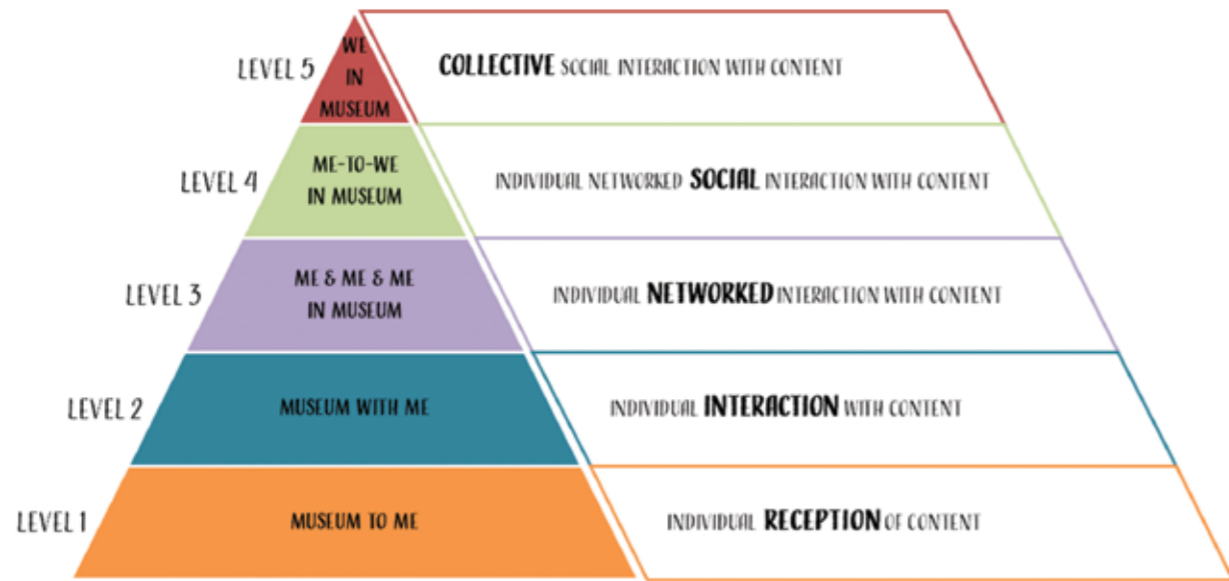# Making History Together: Participation in Museums
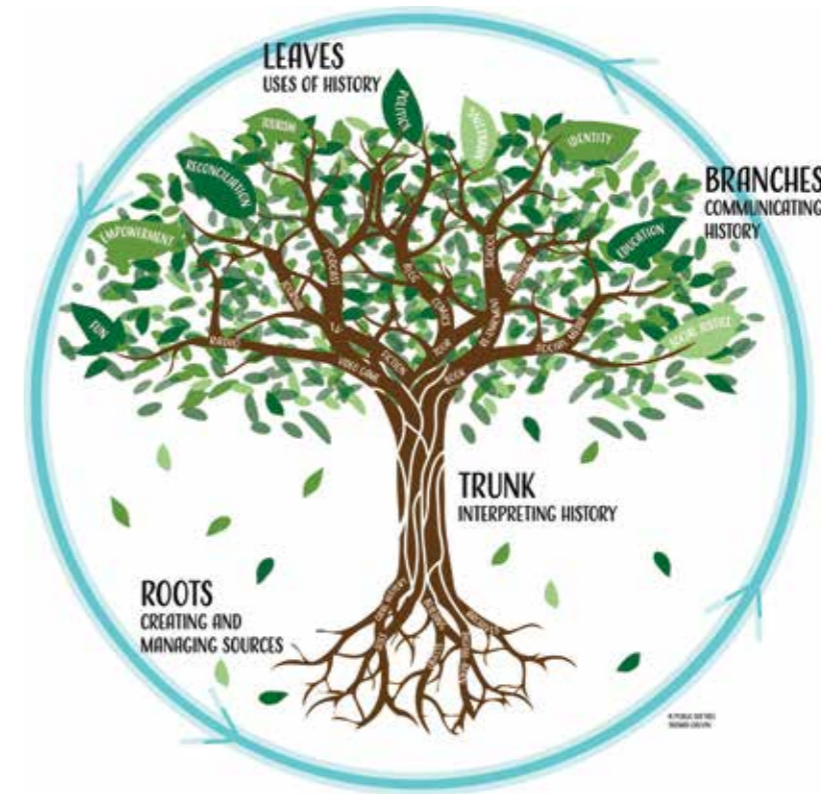
The way in which cultural institutions preserve, create and communicate history has greatly changed in the past decades. The revolution in communications – especially through digital technologies – has affected not only how museums display but also how they research, collect and interpret history. The role, functioning and practices of museums have been changing and have become more participatory. While participatory practices and projects are now widely developed, questions remain on how they impact how history is done and displayed in museums.

Emerging in the 1970s, the term public history reflects and questions these changes in how history is produced in the public space. As the map of the International Federation for Public History shows, public history centres, projects, and courses now exist in different parts of the world. Public history is a process – a way of doing history – that directly engages with the public. It is therefore a history that goes beyond the restricted circles of scholars and academics, and is accessible to popular audiences. It is also a history that is done with – and not only for – the public. This participatory mode of history production is particularly important as it questions the authority, the expertise and the role of historians and cultural institutions such as museums.

Public history can be compared to a tree that is made of several connected parts. The tree represents more than just actors; it shows stages of a process. The tree is built upon relations between roots, trunk, branches and leaves. These parts are different but belong to an overall system; they cannot exist without one another. While history has traditionally been limited to the interpretation of primary sources (the trunk), public history is broader and includes other parts. The roots

Hierarchy of social participation.
© Nina Simon, The Participatory
Museum, Museum 2.0 (2010)

PHACS, Public History as the
New Citizen Science of the
Past.
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Public history harvest: students
collecting artefacts on
the history of beer in Colorado,
United States, 2019.
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represent the creation and preservation of sources (objects, documents, testimonies), the trunk is the analysis and interpretation of sources, the branches are the communication of those interpretations (exhibitions, texts, podcasts, etc.), and the leaves are the multiple public uses. The more the parts are connected, the richer and more coherent public history becomes. The structure is not linear; the uses (leaves) often influence what we deem important to collect and preserve (roots). Thus, the Public His'Tree is not a purely linear process but rather an interconnected system.

Public history encourages the communication of history to large, often non-academic audiences through multiple media, or branches of the tree. In order to share a historical interpretation (trunk) with audiences, practitioners make use of a broad range of communication tools, including radio, books, exhibi-

tions, journals, tours, fiction, comics and, more recently, digital and new media. Visualising public history as an interconnected system shows that some sites and institutions, such as museums or archives (on the left of the tree), belong to several parts and have been practicing public history for a long time. For instance, by creating collections, producing interpretations and research and also producing narratives – in particular through exhibitions – as well as offering the possibility of using and consuming the past – for instance in gift shops – museums demonstrate the richness of the Public His'Tree. These practices are not new, but public history provides a space for discussion and connection between the different actors in the process – scholars and academic historians, cultural institutions, media specialists, decision-makers, groups and associations and users/visitors.

Another major dimension of public history is its focus on public participation in the different steps of the history-making process. Public history is not only about working for the public, it is also about working with the public. Conceptualised by Michael Frisch to describe the dual authority in oral history, i.e., narrator and interviewer, the notion of shared authority exemplifies how public history invites historians to reconsider the participation of a variety of actors in interpreting the past. The collaborative approach of public history is part of a broader process of the democratisation of knowledge production that was also encouraged by the rise of the Internet. Beginning in the early 2000s, the proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies has allowed users to easily create, edit and share content through crowdsourcing and citizen science projects. Through crowdsourcing and user-generated content, cultural institutions and other public history sites have

developed collaborative practices in which members of the public can upload and share historical documents, contribute to the process of researching collections and engage with primary sources to interpret the past. Such collaborative practices make public history both highly engaging and subject to criticism since they call for a new definition of the role of historians.

The crucial challenge is to balance public participation with rigorous and critical methodology at all stages of the process. Public history therefore clearly connects with the participatory turn in museums, as described by Nina Simon in her seminal book *The Participatory Museum*. In her book, Simon shows how public interaction and public engagement can help visitors to become actors of knowledge production in museums. Although participation can vary from museum to museum and from project to

project – as seen in Simon's pyramid of public participation – it nevertheless presents opportunities to practice public history.

Funded by a five-year ATTRACT research grant (2020–2025) from the Fond National de la Recherche in Luxembourg, *Public History as the New Citizen Science of the Past* (PHACS) is a project that develops public history and participatory models for interpreting the past. Inspired by the development of citizen science, one of the key objectives is to collaborate with three museums to establish and evaluate the impact of new participatory models in history-making. PHACS facilitates interactions between academics, cultural institutions, groups, associations and the general public to contribute to a democratisation not only of access but also of the production of history. PHACS collaborates with three museum partners – the Luxembourg City Museum (Luxembourg), M9

(Venice, Italy) and the House of European History (Brussels, Belgium) – to propose new methodologies to turn users and visitors into engaged co-producers of history.

Museums can develop participatory processes for the many different steps in collection management, exhibit design and project management. Thus far, collecting has certainly been the most privileged step of collaboration. Members of the public can help museums by collecting new objects and materials to document the past. For instance, history harvests are public events in which scholars, students, museum professionals and members of the public meet to collect and document new objects and sources. Initially developed to create online collections, history harvests are flexible models that can be easily implemented in museums.

Likewise, the Luxembourg City Museum initiated a collect called *Bréng daïn Déngen* (Bring Your Thing) to prepare its 2022 exhibition on the history of associations. Its curator, Gilles Genot, first relied on a specific site where members of the community could bring any object connected to the association. Museums can also rely on public participation to obtain information and additional research on objects.

Following the model of History Harvests, museums can organise public workshops in which members of the public bring their items. For instance, having no collection on the topic, the MUCEM (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, Marseille, France) organised several public collects to find objects relating to the disease of AIDS. Likewise, the Luxembourg City Museum initiated a collect called *Bréng daïn Déngen* (Bring Your Thing) to prepare its 2022 exhibition on the history of associations. Its curator, Gilles Genot, first relied on a specific site where members of the community could bring any object connected to the association. Museums can also rely on public participation to obtain information and additional research on objects. The Victoria and Albert Museum asked people to collect photographs of clothes worn for weddings from all cultures from 1840 to the present day for their collection *Wedding Dress.*

Members of the public can also act as a community of interpretation for objects. In 2008, the Northern Irish group Healing Through Remembering designed an exhibition about the history of the Northern Irish conflict. The team solicited members of different local communities to avoid unilateral and imposed interpretations on this divisive topic. Public and private collectors were invited to lend one artifact that responded to the overall theme and to write a label to accompany their object. Entitled *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict,* the exhibition was launched in 2011. Likewise, for its 2006 exhibition on the history of warfare in Ireland, the National Museums Northern Ireland (Belfast) used public memories to interpret and display the particularly divisive collections on the Northern Irish Troubles. The museum asked different groups of victims to choose objects from the collections – which could be a weapon used by paramilitary groups,

a political poster, a photograph of the 1972 Bloody Sunday march, etc. – and to recount their own memories associated with the objects. The voices were recorded and acted as labels for the objects through audio presentations. This process contributed to the presentation of multiple interpretations of the conflict.

Although more challenging, designing exhibit space can also include public participation. For their 2022 temporary exhibition on the history of associations, the Luxembourg City Museum has devoted a specific space to community design. As an extension to the main space, a community lab displays the specific history of one association. In this lab, representatives of associations are responsible – under the supervision of curators – for the design. There are assigned movable boards and mounts for texts and objects. In two-day workshops, the curators, in association with public history students

from the University of Luxembourg, provide basic key skills and guidance for text writing and exhibit design to the community members who then organise the display.

Digital technologies can help museums to engage with visitors and users. For instance, the *Your Paintings Tagger* project offers two types of tagging for more than 3,000 painting collections in the United Kingdom. The users are asked to tag paintings using controlled vocabularies for "things or ideas, people, places and events", while self-appointed "expert taggers" provide information on dates and artistic styles. Tagging can be used in historical displays to ask visitors to identify absences/silences in the exhibition and propose additional aspects/topics that the museum could include. Tagging can be performed at home or on site using any digital device, including smartphones. The Metropolitan Museum of Arts launched *It's Time we*

The relevance of the visitors/users may be even more direct in the creation of new projects. Developed by Shelley Bernstein, *Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition* was a participatory exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2008. Based on the concept that a diverse crowd is often wiser at making decisions than expert individuals, the project began with an open call for photographs depicting the changing faces of Brooklyn.

Met, a visitor-contributed contest of photography taken in the museum. In 2013, in relation to their exhibition of thirteen photographs, the Carnegie Museum of Art invited people to submit their own photographic responses via the Internet. Each day the museum printed out new submissions that were hung beside their inspirations.

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The Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum (United Kingdom) launched *Top 40: Countdown of Worcester's Favourite Pictures.* The team of designers purposefully created the Top 40 with minimal labels, but included voting stations in the middle of the gallery where visitors could use paper ballots to vote for their favourite painting and explain their reasoning. The staff then used a selection of visitors' comments to rank the paintings on a weekly basis and to design labels. Visitors' participation had a direct impact on the display.

Sometimes, visitors can even bring their own objects to be added to the display. For instance, the London Science Museum mounted an exhibition called *Playing with Science* about the history of science-related toys, for which the museum asked visitors to bring their own toys for special events. Visitors' toys were displayed in vitrines at the end of the exhibit. Contributors were photographed with their favourite toy and wrote short statements.

Making history together in museums does not mean giving up expertise or methodology. We should reject the "radical trust" that gives complete *carte blanche* to the public to unilaterally decide what history they want and how it should be displayed. Public history means fostering collaboration between various partners and stakeholders to propose enriched narratives of the past.

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