

## ABSTRACT

### Museums and Controversy You Can't Have One without the Other

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Museums today have the possibility of acting as a social changer or influencer within a community by exhibiting current topics, emotional issues, or counter-cultural subjects for the further education and inspiration of visitors. The disadvantage associated with exhibiting these types of shows are the disapproval and negative responses that can be received from the general public and media be it community wide or national.

In this study I provide case studies of three controversial exhibitions from the National Air and Space Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art that received negative responses to reveal the wide range of subjects that could cause controversy in a museum. Furthermore, I suggest recommendations for best practices for the museum community on how to exhibit emotional or controversial topics without attracting disapproval from the public as well as how to handle such responses if they are encountered.

Museums and Controversy  
You Can't Have One without the Other

by

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A Thesis

Department of Museum Studies

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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
DEDICATION .....	vii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	viii
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION .....	1
BACKGROUND .....	4
The Conception and Progression of the Museum .....	4
Museums as an Arena for the Culture Wars .....	9
The Museum Community's Perspective .....	11
Common Reasons for and Responses to Controversial Exhibitions .....	14
Infamous Controversial Exhibitions in the United States .....	15
The National Air and Space Museum and the <i>Enola Gay</i> .....	16
The Slave Reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg .....	28
The Brooklyn Museum of Art and the <i>Holy Virgin Mary</i> .....	36
The Challenge to the Museum Community .....	44
1. METHODOLOGY .....	45
2. RESULTS .....	49
Results of the Interviews with Six Museum Professionals .....	49
The American Airpower Heritage Museum .....	49
The National Museum of the Pacific War .....	51
The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum .....	53

The Barrington Living History Farm .....	56
The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston .....	58
The Blanton Museum of Art .....	61
Conclusion .....	63
3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	64
Recommendations for Executing a Possibly Controversial Exhibition ..	64
Recommendations for Handling Responses to Controversial Exhibitions	68
Notable Topics from the Interviews .....	71
Conclusion .....	73
WORKS CITED .....	76

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Stahler, Cartoon, <i>Cincinnati Post</i> , February 1, 1995 .....	21
2. Tony Auth, Cartoon, <i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i> , February 1, 1995 .....	25
3. Wasserman, Cartoon, <i>Boston Globe</i> , February 2, 1995 .....	27
4. Chris Ofili, <i>Holy Virgin Mary</i> .....	39

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For Bethanie

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Museums today are critically important educational institutions. In playing this role, they possess a power to shape collective values and social understandings in a decisively important fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The modern museum focuses on collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects, all for educational purposes, or so a majority of mission statements claim. In evaluating the museum community, one must ask if these three goals are in fact being accomplished to the greatest extent. Most museums are collecting institutions and actively care for their objects, but are they exhibiting their collections unreservedly in order to educate their patrons? If not, why would a museum staff decide against exhibiting portions of their collections: past negative precedents, self-censorship, influence from boards or donors, fear of controversy? This study was conducted to examine the currently held opinions about controversy in exhibitions. The objective of this thesis is to promote discussion, provide recommendations for institutions on how to properly exhibit a controversial topic, and suggest how to handle negative responses directed at the exhibition or institution from the media and general public.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a period during the culture wars (which were political and cultural conflicts based upon different accepted cultural values) there was a dramatic increase in the number of exhibitions across the nation that was denounced as insensitive, biased, unbalanced, or controversial as a whole. After the year 2000 this

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxv.

number decreased significantly. This fluctuating change should be of great interest to the museum community as many factors could have attributed to it. Some factors are expected and desired, such as the changing opinions and ideals of society, whereas others are less appealing, such as self-censorship and excessive prudence. The museum community should be allowed to choose to exhibit all types of exhibitions for the benefit of their visitors, despite the past negative precedents, by preparing for them properly.

When a museum limits the types of topics covered or the amount of information portrayed in an exhibition they are placing limitations on what and how much visitors can learn and experience. Considering how museums have evolved, and the importance of education in the museum community, this negative setback is unsettling. This is especially true considering that growing numbers of museums include education in their mission statements. Are those museums then not fulfilling their missions if they are withholding information from patrons?

To exhibit is defined as “to present for others to see...to present in a public exhibition... to give evidence or an instance; demonstrate.”<sup>2</sup> By this definition it is the purpose of an exhibition, thus the responsibility of the museum hosting it, to put forth for visitors information on a given event or subject in an open forum. In reference to “evidence” there are no parameters defined by this definition as to what should and should not be presented, thus it is the museum’s responsibility to present the topic from all sides. In other words, museums need to use their best judgment and professional expertise in deciding what information to include in an exhibition, but they should be cautious so as to not restrain the visitor’s educational possibilities. In order to determine

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<sup>2</sup>Anonymous, “Exhibit,” *Dictionary.com* (Random House, Inc.); <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/exhibiting>; Internet; Accessed 09 January 2007.

the best practices for presenting this evidence various museum directors and professionals across the state of Texas were interviewed to find out what methods have been most successful for them and their institutions.

The museum is a public entity, responsible to those whom it is meant to serve: the public. Thus, the museum is also answerable to the public should a conflict arise over the material within its four walls. The conflicts often become widely known through word of mouth and the media. A museum's staff must be well prepared and trained to handle these types of situations.

This thesis will examine the evolution of the educational role within the museum community as well as three nationally known controversial exhibitions from the 1990s. Following this will be the results of the six interviews conducted with the directors of six museums in the state of Texas. Topics discussed were the nature of controversy in museums, and the best practices for handling controversial situation. Finally, by discussing the literature and the interviews, recommendations will be made on how to create or host a controversial exhibition without igniting public criticism, and how best to respond to this negative attention should it occur.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Background

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as a “non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education, and enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup> This definition was only developed though in the most recent stage of museum evolution. The idea of the institution has gone through five different stages of progression for becoming distinguished cultural centers in their communities.

#### *The Conception and Progression of the Museum*

The idea of the museum began as a private institution for the opportunity of individuals to showcase personal collections for themselves and their peers. The earliest known prototype of a collection belonged to Ptolemy Sotor in Alexandria, Egypt, in approximately 290 B.C. His collection consisted of a number of zoological specimens and botanical gardens that were kept for his own private enjoyment, and were not accessible to the general public. He also created a center of learning dedicated to the muses, hence the name museum, or house of the muses. This museum, the first in the world, consisted of a famous library, astronomical observatory, and facilities for research and teaching.<sup>2</sup> Thus, early on education was an important concentration for museums;

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<sup>1</sup>Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup>G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1983), 25.

however, the audiences were smaller and different from audiences of the present. The learning center was meant only for scholars and the aristocracy, or those who could afford a leisurely life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge.

In 1693, in Oxford, England, another museum institution was created, the Ashmolean, also meant for private use only, meaning the scholarly and the aristocratic, and was not accessible to the masses. From this time forward, individuals with collections who desired to put them on display founded a number of museums. The most common ways to display these collections were cabinets of curiosities, athenaeums, and galleries.

Such collections (works of art, curiosities, or objects of scientific interest) had gone under a variety of names (museums, studioli, cabinets des curieux, wunderkammern, kunstkammern) and fulfilled a variety of functions (demonstrations of royal power, symbols of aristocratic or mercantile status, instruments of learning), [and] they all constituted socially enclosed spaces to which access was remarkably restricted.<sup>3</sup>

The Alexandria learning center and the Ashmolean have come to be recognized as examples of the first stage of museum development – the private society institution. Two other institutions founded during this era of museum history, the British Museum, established in 1753, and the Louvre, created in 1750, have survived to this day. Both were created for these types of displays, and were open to the public, “though who the ‘public’ were and who were actually admitted is another question. Surely not the dirty and ragged poor.”<sup>4</sup>

The second stage was that of the commercial museum. In terms of audience these institutions were more inviting to the masses, but their attendance

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<sup>3</sup>Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition*, 93.

<sup>4</sup>G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*, 27.

was still not entirely feasible as the masses had relatively little leisure time for visiting museums. These types of museums also incorporated a new trend – edutainment – or the combination of education and entertainment. This concept of fusing the two trends influenced the development of world fairs, which in turn influenced the progression of museums and led to the kind of institution seen today. “Since the 1870s, practically every large fair has created museums. The Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, for example, spurred the building of the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the National Museum (of the Smithsonian Institution), and several museums in Philadelphia.”<sup>5</sup> This was due to the large amounts of money spent by governments to amass great collections for display at these fairs, and then lacking the resources, like museums, to care for them after the fair’s conclusion. Collections though were not the focus of the world fair’s though – exhibitions were, but not the type seen today. Exhibitions at a world fair were only a public showing of objects, much like an auto show or flower show.<sup>6</sup> Thus, viewers were entertained by the astonishment of seeing such outrageous objects, while being educated on subjects that otherwise never would have been brought to their attention.

The trend of ‘edutainment’ was also unwittingly the main idea behind P.T. Barnum’s circus, which had its beginnings with the Scudder American Museum which Barnum purchased in 1841. He exhibited the original Siamese twins,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 28.

Chang and Eng Bunker, the midget, General Tom Thumb, and the Fiji mermaid. These exhibitions were considered entertaining and inspiring, and quickly became popular showcases in the United States. Edutainment museums may not have been as educational as preferred by academics and scholars, but they did introduce more of the public to the existence of museums by allowing the admittance of a larger number of people.

As if to create the opposite extreme of these edutainment museums, academic museums began opening across the country. Most were university, art, and science museums mainly for the use of scholarly individuals doing research and promoting learning. The primary focus was education, and the audience was limited to those deemed worthy of receiving it. Also, the subjects covered were not meant for the masses, but for the scholarly.

The Trumbull Gallery at Yale, the first university art museum, opened in 1832. It began with the donation of over 100 paintings by John Trumbull, many of which focused on the American Revolution. At the time admittance was highly restricted. Today though, the Trumbull Gallery, now known as the Yale University Art Gallery, states in its mission statement that the collections are meant for Yale students, faculty, artists, scholars, alumni, and the wider public.

As museums continued to grow so did the attending audiences. Public museums, the next development stage, allowed for the admittance of the masses in all their diversity, including people from all social circles, economic statuses, and educational levels. This was partly due to society progressing enough to achieve all of the necessities for the creation of museums: democracy, wealth, infrastructure, appreciation for learning



and knowledge, increased population, intellectually developed society, and, most importantly, leisure time.

Furthermore, wealthy gentlemen were also recognizing the new market of museums and began opening them with vigor nationwide. For example, John D. Rockefeller collaborated with Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin in restoring the colonial town of Williamsburg, Virginia. Moving beyond the initial idea of saving the town's historic homes, Rockefeller created a large living history museum, called Colonial Williamsburg that educates visitors on 18<sup>th</sup> century life in the area of all the varying types of people who lived there. Despite this increased inclusiveness of the museum audience, education was still not the most important facet of programming as the museum community was still very much in the collecting state of mind.

The great age of collection building in museums is over. Now is the time for the next great agenda of museum development in America. This agenda needs to take as its mission nothing less than to engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the works and the possibility of their own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Now began the age of the experience museum. When museums collect objects now the question of value is addressed by the staff, but this value no longer refers only to a monetary value, but also an educational one. Earlier generations valued aesthetics more so than historical and scientific value. The scope of museums has slowly been shifting from a focus on collections to a concentration on education, which has led to the introduction of participatory and interactive exhibitions in museums nationwide. This type of exhibit design, which usually includes a hands-on portion, a technological or media enhanced portion, and even demonstrations, is usually preferred by museum staffs

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<sup>7</sup>Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*/128, no. 3 (1999): 128.

to the previously used form of the static display of authentic objects. This is a result of many educators within the museum community recognizing that there are multiple ways for museum visitors to learn, and that for some merely reading labels will not suffice. Thus, exhibitions are now tailored by museum staffs to try to reach each of the types. Labels are available for those who are textual learners, tour guides for the auditory learners, graphics for the visual learners, and participatory or interactive elements for the tactile learners.

The shift towards education could have been a result of several factors, but the main reason was the time in which it took place. The 1960s was a time of change, politically, socially, and emotionally. One such change was the passing of the 1969 Tax Reform Act, which required that all museums contain educational components to remain eligible for 501[C] [3], or non-profit tax exempt status. Thus, education became a priority to those institutions who wished to remain non-profit. As a result, the American Association of Museums (AAM) created a committee entitled EDCOM in 1973 for the sole purpose of providing ideas and resources for museum education.

### *Museums as an Arena for the Culture Wars*

Culture Wars, political and social conflicts, generally between traditionalists and counter-culturalists, were based upon different accepted cultural values, which began in the 1960s and came to a head in the 1980s and 1990s, caused a major disruption in the museum community concerning education. Until this time there was little unrest within the museum community concerning the subjects and topics exhibited by museums. This was due in part to the general public, namely the middle and lower socio-economic portions of the population. In the beginning, they were grateful for the opportunity to be

included as a part of the institution's audience; thus they were reluctant to voice negative opinions. Furthermore, artist's and historian's works were generally kept within an expected realm that did not generally cause offense or unrest, but as the times changed so did the works. The work of many artists began to shock audiences as they attempted to distinguish themselves from the previously held values in the art world, and alternative points of view on past historical events were suddenly being discussed in open forums as new pieces of information were revealed. These new trends were readily exhibited and discussed within museums as curatorial staffs created exhibitions to portray them. These changes caused portions of the public, and even some academics, to voice their disapproval, which explains the increase in the number of exhibitions across the country that were considered controversial. Yet, others were fascinated and even appreciated the new trends within the art world; museums realized this and chose to exhibit them.

Regardless of the evolution of the museum community and the institutions therein, the basic nature of the museum, that it has an educational purpose based on collecting and preserving objects useful to that purpose, has been constant. Education has always been, and will continue to be, a service that is provided for patrons of all intellects, races, and social status. In the future though, the main question each museum will have to answer will concern how wide of a variety of education and experiences they intend to provide – one perspective, multiple perspectives, the generally accepted view, the counter- cultural view, the possibly obscene or indecent? Hopefully, museum staff's answer will be “all of the above,” so that visitors will be allowed the opportunity to decide for themselves what they are and are not allowed to learn within a museum's walls.

*The Museum Community's Perspective*

“To most outside the museum community, the prime function of museums is usually considered to be the preservation and display of artifacts of archaeological and historical interest.”<sup>8</sup> To those inside the museum community this is false as “museums have always had an education function. The Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology was built to refute Darwin, the Louvre was originally opened to the public to demonstrate the glories of French Imperialism, and other museums were designed to show off national aspirations.”<sup>9</sup> There are those within the museum community who see the need for the exhibition of controversial topics within museums because visitors should be able to choose for themselves what information is appropriate for them. There are also those who feel that education aside, social, political, or alternative histories have no place in exhibitions or programs, and should be omitted. These differing points of views have been expressed in the field’s literature, at museum organization annual meetings, and verbally from one museum professional to another.

For instance, despite the possibility of education for museum patrons, some professionals within the community feel that the risk of negative public relations and a possible smudge on the institutions reputation is not wise because as museums engage the interest of more diverse and pluralistic audiences, they become battlegrounds for larger cultural and historical debates.<sup>10</sup> One museum professional warns against these types of

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<sup>8</sup>G.K. Talboys, *Museum Educator's Handbook* (Vermont: Gower, 2000), 1.

<sup>9</sup>G.E. Hein, “Evaluating Teaching and Learning in Museums,” in *Museum, Media, Message*, ed. E. Hooper-Greenhill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 190.

<sup>10</sup>Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” 125.

exhibitions because museums “can get in more trouble, pound for pound, than any other agency or society – and often do.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, exhibitions are among the most expensive of enterprises in any museum, their costs come under greater scrutiny as administrators attempt to stretch limited financial resources. There is competition for funding from corporations and foundations, and funders often expect high visibility and high attendance in exchange for financial support.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, a controversial exhibition that might need to be revised before opening attracts a low number of visitors due to negative media attention, or if it is canceled altogether it might cost the museum, and its donors, large amounts of money, which could result in lasting negative effects upon the institution.

Yet, many museum professionals claim that “museums are not museums without exhibitions. The most prominent and public of all museum offerings, exhibitions are the soul of a museum experience.”<sup>13</sup> This raises two fundamental questions: is it the responsibility of a museum to exhibit some truths, as they fit into the museum’s mission despite the response they could elicit, and should anyone be allowed to influence which parts of the truth are addressed or suppressed? This presents the opportunity for a museum to utilize its right to free speech and scholarly research, and act as an unbiased source of facts of interpretation for the public.

It has been stated that “the public nature of exhibitions makes them the obvious stage on which to play out the tensions of our times.”<sup>14</sup> This is true due to the wide

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas Nicholson, “More Damn Trouble: Museums and Controversy,” *Museum News*, October 1984, 27.

<sup>12</sup>Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 1999, 101.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

variety of people, in terms of gender, social status, and economic class that museums attract. This allows for mass education and inspiration, and for the opportunity for visitors to become involved in the subject presented.

Timothy Luke, a University distinguished professor of Political Science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, evaluates museums and publishes his opinions. He felt that museums should be presenting controversial subject matters. He has claimed that

whether it is world order, national identity, cultural crisis, technological revolution, or historic change, the museum must pursue open, inclusive, and even antagonistic approaches to preserving the past, exploring the present, and testing the future. And, it must do this despite public outcries or local protests.<sup>15</sup>

This is because “if museums are to be on the frontier of public appreciation and learning about their subject matter, they will be involved in controversies arising from new discoveries, new creations, and new interpretations.”<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, the information museums present to visitors could become outdated and no longer relevant. Also, when a “museum sidesteps an issue or rejects an idea because of its potentially controversial nature, innovation may be thwarted” not only for the visitors but for the museum staff as well.<sup>17</sup> Finally, some museum professionals claim that “showing conflict or controversy can simply be considered part of a museums obligation to educate.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>15</sup>Timothy Luke. “The Museum: Where Civilizations Clash or Clash Civilizes?” *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Hugh Genoways (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 19-26.

<sup>16</sup>Willard L. Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy,” in *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 1999, 186.

<sup>17</sup>Ellen Cochran Hicks, “Editors Notes,” *Museum News*, October 1984, 27.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

“without [controversy]...one of [the museum’s] most important commitments – to challenge the mind of the visitors – is neglected.”<sup>19</sup>

*Common Reasons for and Responses to Controversial Exhibitions*

An exhibition can be considered controversial for a variety of reasons. It could inspire controversy if its topic and/or content is offensive to a portion of the museum’s visitors, if it appears to be one sided, or if it is lacking in perspective or balance. Once an exhibition or programming event is made public, there are three main emotions it can excite: approval, apathy, negativity. If a proposed exhibition receives a positive or apathetic reaction, critics spread their responses mostly by word of mouth, and the exhibition receives little media attention that is not purchased. By contrast, a negative response is expressed through various media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, and local news programs.

Topics deemed controversial by the public can include racial and cultural equality, drug culture, abortion, genocide, religion, and many others. This might be due to the fact that when they are discussed, the public generally gets information from the media, which may only relate said information to a particular area or sect of individuals,<sup>20</sup> or due to biases, might be incorrect. In a world with 24 hour news stations, newspapers, magazines, and Wikipedia®, the possibility that the public is forming its negative opinions due to misinformation is highly probable, as is unnecessary conflict.

The responses from the public to an exhibition can vary due to many factors including the amount of negativity it causes. Newspaper and magazine articles and

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Anthea Hancocks, “Museum Exhibition as a Tool for Social Awareness,” in *Curator*, 1987, 182.

television coverage are the most common outlets for these opinions. Yet some institutions have seen extreme responses in the form of protests, which can take place at the museum itself to spread awareness about an exhibition or the cause associated with the exhibition.

Museum institutions must respond as well in the event that an exhibition or program is branded controversial. The first and most widely used is self censorship in which the museum makes a conscious decision to avoid or at least exhibit subtly certain topics or subjects that could arouse strong opinions or feelings in the community. If the exhibition is already in the stages of planning or construction generally one of three decisions is a result: refusal to change the currently planned exhibition, compromise and suggest revisions, or cancel the exhibition completely.

#### *Infamous Controversial Exhibitions in the United States*

Museums throughout the United States, small and large, have dealt with controversial exhibitions because of objects on display or the topic covered. Three such institutions are the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C., Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art in Brooklyn, New York. The differences between them are apparent in the actions taken in response to the political and public opposition. The National Air and Space Museum chose to create a brand new exhibition in place of a contested one. Colonial Williamsburg chose to leave their event unchanged despite disapproval, hoping the public would change its opinion. The Brooklyn Museum of Art also chose to have its exhibition remain unchanged, but legally fought back against the opposition.



The actions taken by a museum in response to a controversial situation can influence other institutions in the field by setting positive or negative precedents, and it is these precedents that could either advance or hinder the museum community across the globe. For instance, the National Air and Space Museum may have influenced other museums, faced with a similar situation, to redesign their proposed exhibitions with the idea that they would be less complicated. On the other hand, Colonial Williamsburg and the Brooklyn Museum of Art may have inspired other public institutions to stand up for their right to interpret against those who would criticize them. These influences may also have been affected by the media's coverage of the controversy as all opinions discussed would contain biases, and these biases were easily identified and recognized during research.

*The National Air and Space Museum and the Enola Gay*

In some instances, the simple display of an object can be controversial. When exhibits go beyond the 'wonder' of the object standing alone and are designed to inform and stimulate visitor learning, they unconsciously invite controversy—as they should.<sup>21</sup>

On June 28, 1995, the exhibition “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II” opened at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, NASM, in Washington D.C. This exhibition is a distant variation from the original exhibition entitled “The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War,” which was deemed a “political program about the atomic bomb” and

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<sup>21</sup>Willard L. Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy,” 185.

“a politically loaded antinuclear horror show”; while others saw the newly revised exhibition as a “historical cleansing”<sup>22</sup> of the past.

At the center of these two exhibitions and the controversy was the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that was used to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This plane grew to symbolize “a clash between scholarly truth and commemorative myth.”<sup>23</sup> Some claim that “what is believed by the intellectual elite and taught in the university can be subversive in the public square, especially when the subject is wrapped in patriotic myth.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Dr. Martin Harwit, Director of the NASM from 1987 to 1995, believed that the *Enola Gay* and the exhibition should be “a counterpoint to the World War II gallery [the museum had] now, which portrays the heroism of the airmen but neglects to mention in any real sense the misery of war.”<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, politicians and veterans of the war and home front desired a simple, straightforward display of the front section of the *Enola Gay* without a political message. The Smithsonian’s secretary, I. Michael Heymen, claimed that

the institution [was] being criticized from both ends of the spectrum—from those who consider the exhibition as a ‘revisionist’ product critical of the

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<sup>22</sup>John T. Correll, “Museum Promises to Change *Enola Gay* Exhibition,” *Air Force Magazine*, October 1994, 16; Robert S. Dundy, “*Enola Gay* II: If you think you’ve seen this movie before, you are right,” *Air Force Magazine*, December 2003; John T. Correll, “The Activist and the *Enola Gay*,” September 1995, 18; Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 24.

<sup>23</sup>John T. Correll, “Air and Space Museum Director Resigns,” *Air Force Magazine*, June 1995, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Phillip Nobile, “On the Steps of the Smithsonian: Hiroshima Denial at America’s Attic,” *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Phillip Nobile (New York: Marlow & Company, 1995), xxii.

<sup>25</sup>John T. Correll, “War Stories at Air and Space, At the Smithsonian, history grapples with cultural angst,” *Air Force Magazine*, April 1994, 24.

United States and those who accuse us [NASM, of] staging an exhibition which glorifies the decision of the United States to use atomic weapons.<sup>26</sup>

Neither was the case. The goal of the original exhibition “was to examine the interconnections between the atomic bomb, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the atomic stalemate of the Cold War by commemorating the 50 years since V-J Day.”<sup>27</sup> To accomplish that, Dr. Harwit claimed the exhibition focused on “the last moments of the war in the Pacific and the role of the *Enola Gay* in bringing a fierce conflict to a sudden, merciful end for millions of young American servicemen who were poised to sacrifice their lives for their country.”<sup>28</sup> The museum staff’s objective was to inspire a deeper understanding in the visitors about America’s aeronautical and technological advances, the choice to utilize those technologies, and the consequences of their use. However, the “museum says it takes no position on the difficult moral and political questions” they are posing.<sup>29</sup> Dr. Harwit stated the approach of “present[ing] interesting and challenging—or thought provoking—aspects of the history of this country, will perhaps bring greater clarity to some issues that have, for a long time, not been discussed.”<sup>30</sup>

The exhibition would have been divided into three main sections: “A Fight to the Finish” representing the summer of 1945 and the end of the war, “The Decision to Drop

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<sup>26</sup>John T. Correll, “Air and Space Museum Hit by Academic Backlash,” *Air Force Association*, January 1995; available from <http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/195airan.asp>; Internet; accessed 5 December 2006.

<sup>27</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 24.

<sup>28</sup>John T. Correll, “The Three Doctors and the *Enola Gay*,” *Air Force Magazine*, November 1994, 8.

<sup>29</sup>John T. Correll, “War Stories at Air and Space, At the Smithsonian, history grapples with cultural angst,” 24.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

the Bomb” depicting the development of the atomic bomb and the United States decision to utilize it in the war, and “Ground Zero: Hiroshima, 8:15 a.m., August 6, 1945; Nagasaki, 11:02 a.m., August 9, 1945” acting as the emotional center of the exhibition revealing the lives lost as a result.<sup>31</sup> The original script consisted of 559 pages with commentaries and visual aids meant to present visitors with two opposing points of view. The ratios of the American and Japanese presence in the exhibition revealed what Dr. Harwit and several others called “a lack of balance.”<sup>32</sup> It was this disproportion which ignited two nationwide controversies—one over the exhibition’s portrayal of the United States and Japan; the second over the Smithsonian’s educational responsibilities.

The *Air Force Magazine* revealed these issues of disproportion by distributing copies of the original “Crossroads” script and revised editions to various veterans’ organizations and congressional members, several of whom served in World War II, because they felt that the biases needed to be publicized and addressed. Some believed that this was a raid on the part of the Editor-in-Chief John Correll.<sup>33</sup> With the dispersal of the script a flood of opposition overtook the museum staff as veteran’s groups, Congress, and the news media picked up the issue and scrutiny became intense. Not all media coverage though was objective or even entirely correct; even the research for this study, both for and against the original exhibition most likely contained bias. Dr. Tom Crouch, chairman of the Aeronautics Department at NASM and a principle player in the *Enola Gay* controversy claimed at the Congressional hearing that “you have no idea of the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Phillip Nobile, “On the Steps of the Smithsonian: Hiroshima Denial at America’s Attic” *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Nobile, Phillip (New York: Marlow & Company, 1995), xvii.

forces opposing this exhibition, not in your wildest dreams—jobs are at stake, the Smithsonian is at stake.”<sup>34</sup>

Criticism began when World War II veterans petitioned the museum to display the historic bomber in an objective setting and not to use it for shock effect. To emphasize this, “the Committee for the Restoration and Display of the *Enola Gay*, a loose affiliation of World War II B-29 veterans, collected [approximately] 8,000 signatures on a petition asking the Smithsonian to display the aircraft properly or turn it over to a museum that will.”<sup>35</sup> Dr. Harwit claimed

that veterans have the wrong perception about plans to exhibit the *Enola Gay*, [and that] ‘people somehow had the feeling that either [the museum was] going to apologize to the Japanese, which we never had any intention of doing, or that we [were] going to take service people to task for having dropped this bomb, which again, we never had any intention of doing’.<sup>36</sup>

One individual who believed the Smithsonian was attempting to “take service people to task” was Major General Chuck Sweeney, who was the only man to fly both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki missions. He commented, “I don’t need some ‘60s-type professor poisoning the minds of our kids about how terrible America was.”<sup>37</sup> This idea that the Smithsonian staff was attempting to feed our youngest generation with false information proves “there is also a generational divide that manifests itself in the

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<sup>34</sup>John T. Correll, “The Activist and the *Enola Gay*”, 18.

<sup>35</sup>John T. Correll, “The Three Doctors and the *Enola Gay*,” 8; John T. Correll, “War Stories at Air and Space, At the Smithsonian, history grapples with cultural angst,” 24.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 26.

consideration of recent history. Those who lived through an era often see it in a way that can only be imagined by those who can only see it in retrospect.”<sup>38</sup> (Figure 1)

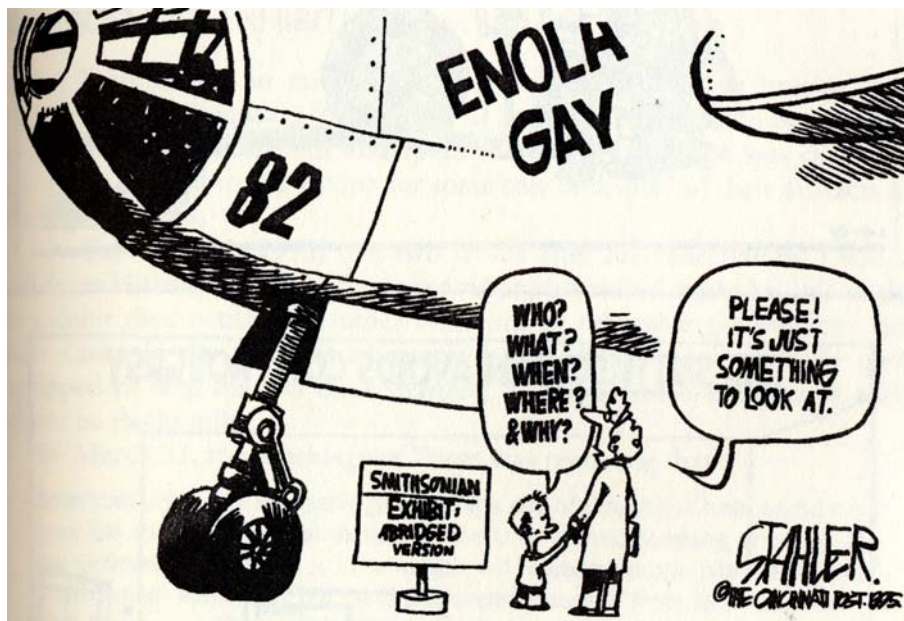


Fig. 1. A political cartoon that illustrates the differences between the generations of the visitors.<sup>39</sup>

The controversy quickly escalated with the involvement of a number of United States congressional members including Representative Tom Lewis (R-FL), Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KA), Representative Bob Stump (R-AZ), Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), and Senator Ted Stevens (R-AL).<sup>40</sup> These individuals and others made public statements that condemned the original exhibition as anti-American and biased.

<sup>38</sup>Willard L. Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy”, 216.

<sup>39</sup>Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay* (New York: Copernicus, 1996), 405.

<sup>40</sup>John T. Correll, “Museum Promises to Change *Enola Gay* Exhibition,” *Air Force Magazine*, October 1994, 16; John T. Correll, “The Three Doctors and the *Enola Gay*,” 8; John T. Correll, “Air and Spaced Museum Director Resigns,” 13; John T. Correll, “Exhibit Blunders Force Smithsonian Probe,” *Air Force Magazine*, July 1995, 23; John T. Correll, “Presenting the *Enola Gay*,” *Air Force Magazine*, August 1995, 19; John T. Correll, “The Activist and the *Enola Gay*,” 18; John T. Correll, “The Revelations of Martin Harwit,” *Air Force Association*. December 1996; available from <http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/1296reve.html>; Internet; accessed 5 December 2006.

Furthermore, Rep. Tom Lewis said on behalf of himself and other congressmen that “the museum’s job is to tell history, not rewrite it.”<sup>41</sup> Sen. Ted Stevens read aloud a section of the statute, Title 20 of the US code, dating from 1961, that provides guidance on a number of issues for the National Air and Space Museum. He claimed that due to this statute NASM did not have any right to question the United States decision to use the atomic bomb, but museum officials stated that that was not their intent.<sup>42</sup>

Due to the media becoming saturated with the controversy, two public hearings were held on May 11 and 18, 1994, by the Senate Rules and Administration Committee, which had oversight responsibility for the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>43</sup> This committee, chaired at the time by Sen. Stevens, one of the advocates for the revision of the exhibition, thus began with an air of bias. The meeting’s main intentions were “to consider how the Smithsonian [would] be managed in the future and what standards [would] be developed for interpretive exhibitions,” but those future standards were quickly utilized for the alteration and later cancellation of the “Crossroads” exhibition.<sup>44</sup> The Senate unanimously passed a resolution on September 23, 1994, calling for NASM to modify its revisionist and offensive exhibition plan. Finally,

after going through a line-by-line rewrite of the exhibit’s 500-page script, spending nearly \$300,000.00 to revise the display, and managing a firestorm of protest that lead to 82 members of Congress demanding the removal of the Air and Space Museum’s director, Martin Harwit, and the exhibitions

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<sup>41</sup>John T. Correll, “Museum Promises to Change *Enola Gay* Exhibition,” 16; John T. Correll, “The Three Doctors and the *Enola Gay*,” 8.

<sup>42</sup>John T. Correll, “Exhibit Blunders Force Smithsonian Probe, 23.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 30.

curator, Michael Neufeld, the Smithsonian Institution's Secretary Michael Heyman, canceled the planned exhibition on 30 January 1995.<sup>45</sup>

The secretary went on to say at the official opening of the new *Enola Gay* exhibition that he had “concluded that [the museum staff] made a basic error in attempting to couple a historical treatment of the use of atomic bombs with the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the end of the war.”<sup>46</sup>

The exhibition that replaced “Crossroads” was “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II.” The new exhibition was judged by the previous one's adversaries to be a job well done. Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, who flew the *Enola Gay*, said that he was pleased and proud with the display that opened in June 1995. With the new version, protest activities, timed to coincide with the opening, were conducted by representatives of about twenty self-styled peace groups and by the Historical Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima. Most of the initial protesting, however, was done outside the museum and consisted of distributing leaflets, displaying banners, and other actions of an orderly nature. Some extreme acts involved protesters flinging red paint onto the carpeting of the exhibition area, and the throwing of human blood and ashes onto the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* itself.<sup>47</sup>

The protests and demonstrations were held due to the belief, mainly on the part of historians, that NASM presented a “historically cleansed” version of events in the new exhibition.<sup>48</sup> The idea was that the views presented in the new version of the exhibition

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>John T. Correll, “The Activist and the *Enola Gay*,” 18.

<sup>47</sup>John T. Correll, “Presenting the *Enola Gay*,” 19.

<sup>48</sup>John T. Correll, “The Activists and the *Enola Gay*,” 18; Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 24.



omitted pieces of information in an attempt to cater to the veterans over the historians. Harwit and Neufeld saw their exhibition, the original, as “fulfilling James Smithson’s original intentions for the Smithsonian, namely, serving for the increase and diffusion of knowledge” whereas Heyman’s version was more in line with what veterans and politicians wished to see.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, “revisionist scholars, peace activists, writers, and others [were] pressing their counterattack[s] in books, journals, and statements to news media as well as through various public programs and platforms.”<sup>50</sup> Some of these views were even expressed through political cartoons in various publications across the country (Figure 2). These actions, statements, editorials, and cartoons included the idea that the Smithsonian was overwhelmed by the veterans and politicians, and therefore put on an exhibition that dishonored the very principles of free speech and free inquiry. Secretary Heyman countered this at a June 1995 press conference claiming that “objections to the first exhibition had not come only from ‘a handful of people or simply a handful of legislators’ and that he had received between 30,000 and 40,000 letters from citizens.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the controversy, the new exhibition opened June 28, 1995, and “by the end of July, almost 100,000 people had gone through it, [and] more than ninety percent of the comment cards turned in by visitors expressed [a] favorable reaction.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, despite the nationwide negative press NASM received, people attended the exhibition in high numbers to see for themselves the cause and effect of such a controversy.

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup>John T. Correll, “The Activist and the *Enola Gay*,” 18.

<sup>51</sup>John T. Correll, “Presenting the *Enola Gay*,” 19.

<sup>52</sup>John T. Correll, “The Activists and the *Enola Gay*,” 18.

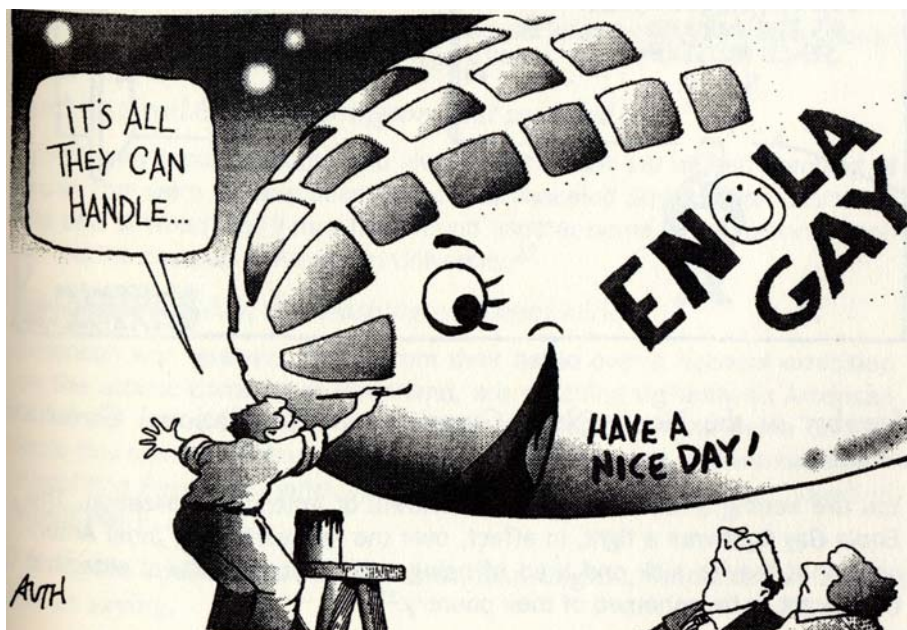


Fig. 2. A political cartoon depicting the *Enola Gay* in only a positive connotation.<sup>53</sup>

The display of the *Enola Gay* set a great precedent for American museums caught in the turmoil of accurately presenting a controversial exhibition in the midst of public opposition and bad publicity. Harwit and Neufeld were attempting to provide an alternative point of view to educate the public on the consequences of one of the nation's greatest decisions. Although the complex task museums must face is getting visitors to think beyond the commonly held notions of society and consider these alternative ideas, this more often than not induces rage, not reasoned reflection. This fact was proven by the unwillingness to see the lunchbox of Shigeru Orimen, a 17 year old victim of the Hiroshima bombing, alongside the *Enola Gay*.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Harwit, Martin, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay*, 405.

<sup>54</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 36.

This situation might have ended with a less controversial result if the staff of the National Air and Space Museum had broadened the exhibition to include the time period before the dropping of the nuclear bombs. This would have given visitors the chance to see each country as both the aggressor and victim in the war, which may have made the veterans more comfortable with the exhibition while still providing all of the facts historians wished to see. Also, the inclusion of various people and their differing perspectives during the planning stages of the exhibition could have resulted in a more balanced original script. Those invited could have included survivors, veterans, peace activists, historians, and young adults who were born in the generation after the war. A former chancellor of the University of California, asserted that the Smithsonian could have avoided the controversy by

ignoring the anniversary, displaying the *Enola Gay* without comment, setting forth only the justification for the use of atomic weapons without either reporting the contrary arguments or indicating the impact of the bombs on the ground, [but in his opinion] the Smithsonian has a broader role than simply displaying items in the so-called nation's attic or eschewing important topics because of the political difficulties created by an exhibition.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the public relations nightmare that plagued the original *Enola Gay* exhibition, the National Air and Space Museum should be recognized for attempting to bring alternative points of view to their patrons. It is impossible for any museum to avoid controversy, as one political cartoonist pointed out by imagining the Smithsonian as controversy-free, which meant the only objects remaining on the walls were nails (Figure 3). To avoid it completely, museums would have to remove any objects that could be considered offensive or in bad taste to any group, sect of people, or organization from display. The lesson is that not every group can be completely satisfied with the results of

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<sup>55</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, 24.

an exhibition, but by inviting the perspectives of each group, a more thorough and accurate exhibition can be presented to the masses.

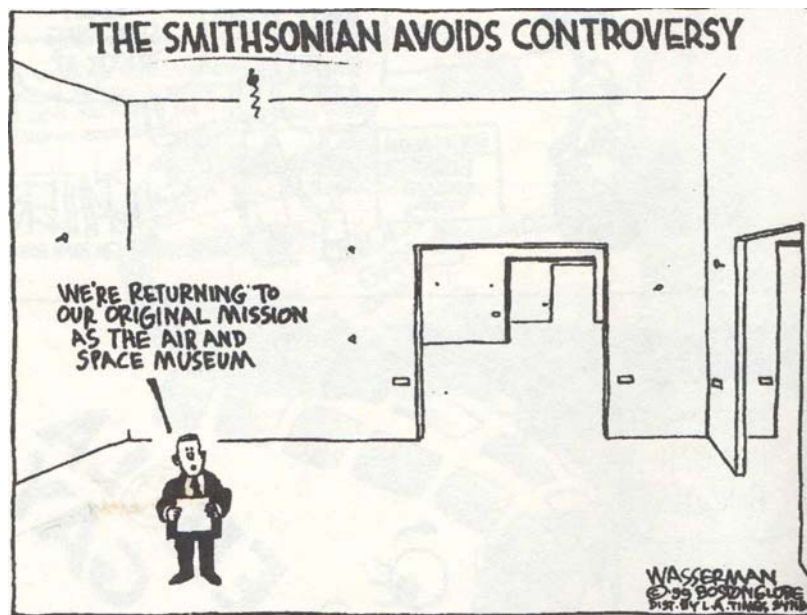


Fig. 3. Political cartoon depicting the Smithsonian as “free” of controversy.<sup>56</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the exhibition of the *Enola Gay* provided a positive lesson for other institutions considering exhibiting topics of controversy. At the National Museum of American History Dr. Harwit realized that they

needed to move beyond the usual museum exercise of presenting history from a historian’s perspective, beyond our usual techniques of displaying objects and providing explanations and interpretations; these techniques privileged historical analysis and depreciated the value of memory. [The museum] simply couldn’t do that after the ‘*Enola Gay*’ fiasco; [they] had to find a way to allow both memory and history to play a role.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Harwit, Martin, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay*, 406.

<sup>57</sup>Steven Lubar, “Exhibiting Memories,” in *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne Kaeppler (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 15.

The pressure placed upon the institution due to the content of the *Enola Gay* exhibition was unfortunate in that it caused members of the museum community to feel unsure about the exhibition of topics or objects that could attract such attention, yet it did allow NASM and others to learn how to prepare better for exhibitions of contentious topics in terms of creating an educational and entertaining exhibition that is not seen as insensitive or offensive.

### *The Slave Reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg*

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, CWF, in Williamsburg, Virginia, is the world's largest living history museum, and encompasses a restored 18th-century village, which was the capital of Britain's largest, wealthiest, and most populous outposts in the New World. The purpose of the institution is to interpret the beginnings of American life as well as the origins of the idea of America. With the use of first and third person costumed interpreters, Colonial Williamsburg attempts to tell the stories of the "men and women of the 18th-century city—black, white, and native American, slave, indentured, and free—and the challenges they faced. In this historic place, [they] help the future learn from the past."<sup>58</sup>

In the summer of 1979 the CWF strove to improve upon these goals by teaching its visitors the complex social and cultural history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Williamsburg community. To help accomplish this, "the focus for house tours was shifted to the daily lives of household members, their potential interactions within the home and with others

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<sup>58</sup>Anonymous, "Our Mission," *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*; available from <http://www.history.org/foundation/mission.cfm>; Internet; accessed 12 January 2007.

within the community.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the addition of African American programming was added to the CWF’s itinerary to accommodate these new intentions. Unfortunately, this decision was not fully supported by the staff as some believed the traditional method of museum interpretation did not include “social history.” “Therefore, the proposed changes were considered by many to be a sure-fire sign of the Apocalypse... [thus] the decision to introduce social history resulted in a minor coup among many front-line staff and historic tradesmen who simply refused to take part in the reinterpretation efforts.”<sup>60</sup>

Despite the opposition, the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) was created in 1979 to begin planning new tours and events with the central idea being the depiction of everyday life for an African American in 18<sup>th</sup> century Williamsburg. “This effort was the first known attempt by a mainstream (‘white’) museum to deal with slavery on such a scale.”<sup>61</sup> Those outside of the foundation predicted that “music, religion, and work were suitable subjects for interpretation, [but] slave auctions and the daily humiliations masters visited on slaves would probably never be shown because they would be unpleasant for the staff members who recreated them and might alienate visitors.”<sup>62</sup>

Efforts began with the introduction of a variety of African American characters into the town’s daily tours, and events. “For the first time the history of black people had

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<sup>59</sup>Christy Coleman Matthews, “Twenty Years Interpreting African American History: A Colonial Williamsburg Revolution,” *History News*, Spring 1999, 6.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>62</sup>Warren Leon and M. Piatt, “Living History Museums,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and R. Rosenweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 78; Erin Krutko, “Colonial Williamsburg’s Slave Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History and Public Memory,” (Master’s Thesis, College of William and Mary in Virginia, 2003), 11.

faces and a voice.”<sup>63</sup> The programming’s success for over 15 years led Christy Coleman, Director of the AAIP, to the idea of a reenactment of an estate sale, but what was the best way of approaching the sensitive topic?

At other living-history museums costumed interpreters must decide between two methods of bringing to life a bygone era: They can either adopt the persona of a historical figure and address visitors in the first person, or they can assume an intermediate (and possibly confusing) role attired in historical garb, but speaking as a modern in the third person like any other museum docent or lecturer.<sup>64</sup>

Coleman decided to interpret the program using the first person approach. Thus, the event, held on October 10, 1994, involved the auctioning off of four costumed black interpreters, portraying slaves, to wealthy white interpreters for the purpose of paying off their master’s debt. Characters included Sukie, a laundress, Billy, a carpenter complete with tools, Daniel, a grown field worker, and Lucy, a pregnant house slave and wife to Daniel. Held on the steps of the Williamsburg’s Weatherburn tavern, as it would have been in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the auction “depicted a dehumanizing event, but one free black appropriated this process to buy freedom for his wife [Sukie], while others displayed admirable qualities of strength and dignity amidst the deepest of suffering.”<sup>65</sup>

Leading up to the event, controversy dominated as mixed reviews were made known to the CWF from its own employees, organizations such as the Virginia chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the general public. The criticism

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<sup>63</sup>Christy Coleman Matthews, “Twenty Years Interpreting African American History: A Colonial Williamsburg Revolution,” 6.

<sup>64</sup>Donald Garfield, “Too Real for Comfort,” *Museum News*, January/February 1995, 8.

<sup>65</sup>Mercedes J. Quintos, “Museum Presentations of Slavery: The Problems of Evidence and the Challenge of Representation,” 1999; available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~mstd/publications/1999/mercedes%20quintos.pdf>; Internet; accessed 7 December 2006.

centered on four issues: 1) Colonial Williamsburg, as a predominately white run institution not being the appropriate setting for such a reenactment, especially considering for decades the institution ignored the contributions of African Americans; 2) the event would fuel racial discord; 3) reenacting an auction showed blacks in a powerless role, and not enough empowered roles had been depicted; and 4) the most emotional response of all: “You would not reenact Jews going into a gas chamber or a rape, so why this?”<sup>66</sup>

The media attention directed at the CWF did allow for the institution to refute some of the accusations. The administration replied to the first criticism by claiming that that it was their responsibility to educate their visitors on all aspects of 18<sup>th</sup> century life in Williamsburg, which included African Americans who composed “52% of the community’s population” at the time. Responding to the second critique was somewhat more difficult, but the administration stressed the fact that the “program was designed to educate, not provoke.” Furthermore, they believed that the third comment was baseless because showing the blacks as powerless in the auction was the point since they were at the mercy of their owners, and “those who felt that there was a lack of programming that showed blacks in more empowering roles had not seen any programming”. Finally, the CWF was perplexed by the fourth statement, because “images and depictions of the Holocaust and rape were frequently topics of film and television, yet [those] audience[s] would never have the opportunity [the CWF] provided—the opportunity to ask questions and get answers.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Christy Coleman Matthews, “Twenty Years Interpreting African American History: A Colonial Williamsburg Revolution,” 9.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 10.



The NAACP and the SCLC became involved after they were contacted by the Foundation with a promotional overview of the upcoming event. The NAACP claimed that the proposed event was “not only in bad taste but also insulting and harmful to people of African descent, [as] a painful and unwanted reminder of a nightmarish past.”<sup>68</sup> Dr. Milton A. Reid, a Baptist pastor with SCLC exclaimed that “this is 1994. As far as we have come, to go back to this, for entertainment, is despicable and disgusting. This is the kind of anguish we need not display.”<sup>69</sup> Several people, including the leaders of NAACP and the SCLC, demanded that the CWF stop the reenactment and cancel it. Colonial Williamsburg officials refused, as did Christy Coleman, who refused to retreat, arguing that slavery was an essential part of the history. At the event itself “speakers from the NAACP and the SCLC threaded their way through the crowd to angrily decry the pending performances ‘degradation’ and ‘trivialization’ of African Americans and their heritage.”<sup>70</sup>

Many blacks believed that the performance was held for entertainment purposes only and trivialized the lasting effects of slavery. Coleman, the organizer of the event who played Lucy, responded to these comments and others on the Today Show. She stated that the

purpose of [the] re-enactment [was] to remind people how other human beings, African-American human beings, were treated once they arrived here... We have been teaching African-American history here at Colonial Williamsburg for 15 years when there are still institutions who do not do it.

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<sup>68</sup>Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice,” in *The Journal of American History*, March 2004.

<sup>69</sup>Donald Garfield, “Too Real for Comfort,” 8.

<sup>70</sup>Tamara Jones, “Living History of Undying Racism,” *Washington Post*, 11 October 1994; Quintos, Mercedes J, “Museum Presentations of Slavery: The Problems of Evidence and the Challenge of Representation.”

Our visitors come here and they learn things that they did not learn in their history books because they have been omitted.<sup>71</sup>

The performance was witnessed by a racially mixed audience of approximately 2,000,” as well as several media representatives. Before the event could even begin, protesters in the crowd began calling out their criticisms. Jack Gravely, a member of the NAACP exclaimed that “you cannot portray our history in 21 minutes and make it some kind of slide show...We don’t want the history of a people who have come so far to be trivialized in a carnival atmosphere such as we have here.”<sup>72</sup> In light of the tense atmosphere, Coleman announced that the performance could not proceed because the administration feared violence breaking out amongst the crowd. With this announcement viewers shouted questions of why, what’s going on here? The change in atmosphere caused a change of mind and Coleman addressed the crowd once more.

What is happening today, I think, is a real tragedy. However, we came here to teach the story of our mothers and grandmothers. We came here, to do this voluntarily ...We wanted to do this so each and every one of you never forget what happened to them ...I am grateful for all of you who came out here to support us ...who came out here with an open mind ....Those of you who ...oppose [us] ...don’t understand our track record, our history, our respect, and our integrity for what we do ....I wish to God that you had come and talked to me, and we would have told you what we were planning. But no, that did not happen ....You are all going to watch. And after seeing this, I want you with honest hearts and honest minds to judge what happens here.<sup>73</sup>

Two particular protestors, both from the SCLC, “sat down on the steps of the porch where the auction was to be staged. Colonial Williamsburg officials respected their right

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<sup>71</sup>Clarence Waldron, “Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate on Slavery and Racism- Reenactment in Colonial Williamsburg, VA,” *Jet*, October 31, 1994, 13.

<sup>72</sup>Donald Garfield, “Too Real for Comfort,” 9.

<sup>73</sup>Tamara Jones, “Living History of Undying Racism”; Erin Krutko, “Colonial Williamsburg’s Slave Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History and Public Memory,” 10.

to protest and the two civil rights veterans remained rooted on the spot for the duration of the performance.”<sup>74</sup>

Following the highly emotional performance the players stepped out of character to answer questions directly from the guests. These included “How were runaway slaves punished? Were children slaves too?” Coleman, and two other CWF members, handled this question and answer portion of the event honestly and with a wealth of information. She even allowed the protesters the opportunity to address the crowd at the conclusion of the event, but they declined.<sup>75</sup>

Some of the criticizing ended alongside the performance, but others were persistent. Brenda Andrews, a local newspaper publisher stated before the auction that the event was “in poor taste” and afterwards that it was merely “entertainment.”<sup>76</sup> Others though were silenced by what they observed, both in the reenactment and in the other members of the audience. Following the event, Gravely from the NAACP, remarked “Pain had a face. Indignity had a body. Suffering had tears.”<sup>77</sup> His change of opinion led other disapprovers to reevaluate their opinions on the event as well. Still others were always aware of the importance of the event for their history. One black mother, Rosalind Smith, took her nine-year-old daughter Christina out of school for the day to witness the staged auction, stating that she wanted her daughter to see it “so she would

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>75</sup>Tamara Jones, “Living History of Undying Racism.”

<sup>76</sup>Clarence Waldron, “Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate on Slavery and Racism- Reenactment in Colonial Williamsburg, VA,” 14.

<sup>77</sup>Donald Garfield, “Too Real for Comfort,” 10.

really know that it happened and that there's nothing to be ashamed of, because when she was in school it wasn't taught."<sup>78</sup>

Coleman and the CWF believed that overall the event was a success because "it put a face to what happened, [and] people will remember what they [saw] and [felt] and [heard] far more than what they read."<sup>79</sup> She was not sure whether she would try to put on another such reenactment, but her hesitation had nothing to do with what she believed to be the integrity of the project. Even today, more than a decade later, Colonial Williamsburg interpreters must defend the educational merit of the estate sale reenactment, but the director of presentations and tours, Bill White, claims that if "Christy Coleman and the other members of the staff were to come to me and say 'let's do it again', I'd back them up all the way."<sup>80</sup>

Groups whose histories have been excluded or marginalized in the past are now trying to define their role in the telling of their story. In presenting any of these groups' histories, particularly one as sensitive and politically loaded as slavery, museums must be prepared to grapple with three important questions. Which events should represent the history of the group? Who can legitimately represent the group? How should these stories be presented?<sup>81</sup>

The CWF staff believed they were an appropriate organization to put on this event due to their desire to educate their visitors on the town's entire history, both black and white. Also, the staff was experienced, educated, and multicultural, and

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<sup>78</sup>Tamara Jones, "Living History of Undying Racism"; Clarence Waldron, "Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate on Slavery and Racism- Reenactment in Colonial Williamsburg, VA," 14.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.; Tamara Jones, "Living History of Undying Racism."

<sup>80</sup>Erin Krutko, "Colonial Williamsburg's Slave Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History and Public Memory," 109.

<sup>81</sup>Mercedes J. Quintos, "Museum Presentations of Slavery: The Problems of Evidence and the Challenge of Representation," 13.

sought outside help from other historians and event planners for their African-American programming. Finally, the reenactment was thought to be appropriate because it did not omit racially sensitive facts or underplay the issue. “Institutions which are equipped to deal with these challenges should by all means tackle the representation of slavery...as there are ample opportunities to create an impressive, engaging exhibition.”<sup>82</sup>

Colonial Williamsburg’s interpretation department states that

we must now forget that history includes the underprivileged and the discontent. We must aim to discover and present a truthful and broadly based past that has relevance to all whether or not they agree with the way things have turned out so far.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, “few museums of whatever kind have ever made the point in such a clear and uncompromising manner. Most would probably have been frightened to do so.”<sup>84</sup>

The courage of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation to tackle such a controversial and historically emotional topic and to stand up against their disapprovers should be recognized throughout the museum community. The CWF considered it more important to provide an educational experience for their visitors through an emotionally moving and informative programming event than to let themselves be dominated by negative media attention. This example should be heeded by other institutions as a positive example of what the museum community can do for its public if it is not afraid to put forward possibly controversial exhibitions and events.

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 150.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

*The Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Holy Virgin Mary*

Another institution, like the CWF, that believed that its public and its contributing artists should come before fear of negative press or public retaliation is the Brooklyn Museum of Art, BMA. On September 18, 1997, the citizens of New York City were forced to answer a significant question: Which is more important – free speech or sensitivity? “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,” an exhibition displaying 42 works loaned by Charles Saatchi, a leading British contemporary arts collector and dealer, opened at the Brooklyn museum and spawned a great debate throughout the city, and the nation, over an artist’s right to free speech and whether or not taxpayer money should fund an exhibition may not be appropriate for all citizens in terms of age and religion.

The exhibition included Damien Hirst’s “A Thousand Years,” composed of flies, maggots, a cow’s head, sugar, and water with the objective of portraying decay, another Hirst work, “This Little Piggy Went to the Market, This Little Piggy Stayed Home” a split pig carcass floating in formaldehyde, and Marc Quinn’s, “Self,” a bust of the artist made from nine pints of his own frozen blood.<sup>85</sup> Prior to opening, a wide variety of responses from the public flooded the media ranging from respect, acceptance, apathy, and disgust, but it soon became apparent that the real debate was not centered on the quality of the show itself. Instead the focus largely centered on our First Amendment rights.

The piece that came to symbolize the controversy, and bore the brunt of opposition, much like the *Enola Gay* in 1994, was “The Holy Virgin Mary” by Chris

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<sup>85</sup>Online News Hour, “The Art of Controversy,” *Public Broadcasting Network*. Online Audio Clip, October 8, 1999; available from [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec99/art\\_10-8.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec99/art_10-8.html); Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

Ofili, a Nigerian Catholic. The piece depicted a black Madonna that was adorned with elephant dung and surrounded by a collage of female genitalia from pornographic magazines that appeared from a distance to be traditional cherubim (Figure 4). Some visitors had no adverse reaction to the painting and did not understand the commotion surrounding the exhibition, yet others were deeply disturbed by what they considered to be a sacrilegious depiction of the Virgin Mary. One nun commented to the media that the piece was an insult to the mother of her God and to her.<sup>86</sup>

Others were not content with simply verbally protesting the exhibition, but believed physicality was necessary as well. Dennis Heiner was one such individual. Feigning illness to lull a security guard away from “The Holy Virgin Mother,” the 72-year-old quickly jumped between the sheet of plexiglas that was protecting the painting before smearing white paint over the face and neck of the Madonna. Mr. Heiner was soon after arrested for a second-degree criminal mischief felony. When asked for his reasoning by local media and law enforcement, he replied that he was forced to take action because the exhibition was blasphemous to his religion.<sup>87</sup> The main issue though was that by his exercising his First Amendment right to protest the art piece he was also denying the other visitor’s rights; that of viewing the exhibition and all objects within it in their original state and context. Mr. Heiner’s response came as no surprise to the Brooklyn museum’s staff. They were well aware of the provocative nature of the show beforehand since it had previously been exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art in

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Robert D. McFadden, “Painting in Disputed Exhibit Attacked by Man at Museum,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1999; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/121799brooklynn-museum.html>; Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

London though while on exhibition there did not receive near as much negativity from the public.



Fig. 3. *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili depicting a black Madonna, adorned with elephant dung, surrounded by a collage of female genitalia from pornographic magazines that appeared from a distance to be traditional cherubim.<sup>88</sup>

The most powerful voice of protest against the exhibition, besides various religious groups and censorship associations, was New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani who claimed the show was insulting to Catholics. Giuliani did not believe tax payer dollars should go towards the funding of an institution that did not exhibit shows that were sensitive to its visitor's beliefs. He stated that the museum did not "have a right

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<sup>88</sup>Anonymous, "The Saatchi Gallery Highlights," *Guardian Unlimited Arts*; available from <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/image/0,8543,-11504640117,00.html>; Internet; accessed 23 April 2007.



to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else's religion."<sup>89</sup> Giuliani went on to say that "nothing in the First Amendment supports horrible and disgusting projects.... [and that] if you're going to use taxpayers' dollars, you have to be sensitive to the feelings of the public."<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, he argued that by exhibiting "Sensation," a show that was not appropriate for children, the Brooklyn Museum of Art was in violation of their building's lease, which stipulated that they would create exhibitions for all of their institution's patrons. This arose from the BMA setting a provision at the opening of the exhibition that children under 17 were prohibited from attending the exhibition without adult supervision, but the BMA revised the provision by eliminating the age restriction and instead posting a warning sign advising parents of the challenging nature of some of the works.<sup>91</sup>

The Mayor's opposition led to threats to evict the Brooklyn Museum of Art from its building, which it had occupied for 106 years, and to discontinue the museum's subsidy payments from the city. In an attempt to drive home its point, the city withheld the subsidy check from the BMA that would have been due at the time the exhibition opened, which should have totaled \$497,554.00.<sup>92</sup> Currently the Brooklyn Museum of Art receives approximately seven million dollars a year, roughly one third of its budget from New York City, and the loss of those funds could possibly force the institution to

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<sup>89</sup>Christopher Rapp, "Dung Deal—Brooklyn Museum of Art's 'Sensation' Exhibition;" available from [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_1282/is\\_20\\_51/ai\\_56220691/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_1282/is_20_51/ai_56220691/print); Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

<sup>90</sup>Anonymous, "Sensation Exhibit: Sensation in New York," Wikipedia; available from [http://www.wikipedia.com/wiki/Sensation\\_Exhibition](http://www.wikipedia.com/wiki/Sensation_Exhibition); Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

<sup>91</sup>David Barstow, "Brooklyn Museum Sues to Keep Mayor From Freezing its Funds," *New York Times*, 29 September 1999; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/092999brooklyn-museum.html>; Internet, accessed 10 December 2006.

<sup>92</sup>David Barstow, "Brooklyn Museum Sues to Keep Mayor from Freezing its Funds."

close its doors permanently.<sup>93</sup> Finally, Giuliani threatened to fire the members of the BMA's Board of Trustees since they allowed such an exhibition to be approved.

Despite these actions a few senior officials at the museum did attempt to remain in negotiations with the city for some time in an attempt to find an agreement between the two entities that would not result in a compromise of the exhibition or a loss of operating funds for the institution. These were all unsuccessful, though, as the museum stated that "the ideals of the institution are not on the bargaining table"<sup>94</sup> and that the city was only attempting to achieve their own wants and were not addressing those of the BMA or the public that wished to view the exhibition. Finally, the BMA board voted to reject Giuliani's request for another day of negotiations and instead filed a law suit in the federal court with the intention of keeping Giuliani from inflicting "any punishment, retaliation, or sanction of any kind against the museum for staging the exhibition."<sup>95</sup> Such punishment, the suit said, included terminating the museum's lease, seizing the museum's building, cutting off funding, or firing the museum's Board of Trustees.

The attorney for the BMA, Floyd Abrams, a well known First Amendment right attorney, responded to the Mayor's remarks, stating "that [the] mayor is saying, in effect, if there is a book in a library that we [the city] fund, I can take it out if it's offensive."<sup>96</sup> Floyd went on to say that the mayor's way of thinking was profoundly dangerous due to the precedent it would create and that was why this law suit was not important only to the

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<sup>93</sup>Online News Hour, "The Art of Controversy."

<sup>94</sup>David Barstow and David Herszenhorn, "Brooklyn Museum Official Discussed Removing an Offending Work," *New York Times*, 28 September 1999; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/092899brooklyn-museum.html>; Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

<sup>95</sup>David Barstow, "Brooklyn Museum Sues to Keep Mayor From Freezing its Funds."

<sup>96</sup>Online News Hour, "The Art of Controversy."

BMA, but also to any publicly funded cultural institution. He concluded that “the First Amendment says, according to a wide, sustained continuing body of case law, that the funding process may not be used to coerce institutions such as this to do the bidding of its political leaders.”<sup>97</sup>

The case was ruled over by Judge Nina Gershon of the United States District Court and resulted in a complete victory for the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the First Amendment, and artists who feared political censorship. Judge Gershon’s, in a 38-page decision, ruled that “there is no federal constitutional issue more grave than the effort by government officials to censor works of expression and threaten the vitality of a major cultural institution as punishment for failure to abide by government demands for orthodoxy.”<sup>98</sup> The judge even quoted a 1952 United States Supreme Court decision overturning a New York statute that authorized the state to deny licenses to motion pictures considered to be sacrilegious. Thus, the city was ordered to continue funding the BMA, and to pay past subsidies that had been denied the institution. Also, the city was not allowed to evict the BMA from their building, fire members of the Board of Trustees, or penalize the BMA through any other type of action, since they were all clear violations of the First Amendment. The city did not back down from this loss though and claimed that it would appeal the decision by changing the approach from that of lease violations to the funding of the exhibition itself.

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<sup>97</sup> David Barstow, “Brooklyn Museum Sues to Keep Mayor from Freezing its Funds.”

<sup>98</sup>David Barstow, “Giuliani is ordered to Halt Attacks against Museum,” *New York Times*, 2 November 1999; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/110299brooklyn-museum.html>; Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

Meanwhile, Chris Ofili did not understand the high amount of controversy surrounding his piece. His use of elephant dung, which seemed to anger so many in the United States, is thought to be inoffensive in Zimbabwe and is a common art medium.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, its use was a reference to the artist's African heritage and not intended as an affront to Catholicism. Ofili later stated that he thought there was a larger agenda in the background of the controversy – possibly the Senatorial race between Mayor Giuliani, who later removed himself from the running, and Hilary Clinton, who came out in support of the BMA.<sup>100</sup>

Even those museum officials who privately disliked “Sensation” could not help but feel that museums’ own fates as cultural institutions were precarious. “What was at stake was their interpretation of the First Amendment, which lets a public museum show work without fear of financial retribution if someone in the government finds the work offensive.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, the BMA’s victory allowed many museum officials to feel secure with their exhibitions and interpretations because the “Sensation” exhibition was not the true controversy – free speech and government funding were instead; the BMA merely became the arena.

It is important to mention that the content of the “Sensation” exhibition was not the only reason this exhibition was considered to be controversial. First, the director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art was aware of the publicity and increased visitorship this exhibition could attract for his institution. Thus, he knowingly brought some of the

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<sup>99</sup>Christopher Rapp, “Dung Deal—Brooklyn Museum of Art’s ‘Sensation’ Exhibition.”

<sup>100</sup>David Barstow and David Herszenhorn, “Brooklyn Museum Official Discussed Removing an Offending Work.”

<sup>101</sup>Michael Kimmelman, “In the End, the ‘Sensation’ is more in the Money,” *New York Times*, 3 November 1999; available from <http://www.nytimes/library/arts/110399brooklyn-museum.html>; Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

negativity received on the museum. Furthermore, Charles Saatchi's involvement, monetarily and influentially, was on concern. He not only loaned the pieces for the exhibition, but also donated a large amount of money for its installation. Following the exhibition he sold a number of the pieces for amounts that were most likely inflated due to their having been exhibited in a museum.

These three institutions were all the focus of national controversies because of their exhibitions and programs. Each took different paths in responding to the controversies, yet each provided a learning experience for the rest of the museum community. Due to these precedents, visitors will no longer be as limited on what they can learn within a museum's four walls since it is now recognized that a museum can put forward alternative points of view or objects not necessarily to everyone's taste with the intent that an exhibition is not censored and patrons have the opportunity to conceive their own judgments.

### *The Challenge to the Museum Community*

The museum community has an obligation to visitors to provide educational experiences through exhibitions and programming events, and this responsibility should be respected despite the type of attention certain subjects can attract. This can be accomplished if the museum that creates the exhibition attempts to portray the topic in the most appropriate way while also being prepared to handle the controversy that might erupt from the situation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

Museums in the United States enjoy a right that many institutions outside of the nation cannot boast of – the right to free speech. American museums, as well as artists and historians, are allowed by the United States Constitution and government to put forth their works without fear of censorship or persecution. Yet, several institutions are wary of exhibiting shows that will cause disapproval from the general public and labeled controversial because such a stigma could lead to negative public relations in the media.

The primary objective of this study is to promote discussion within the museum community about the exhibition of objects concerning subjects that may be considered controversial by the general public. This is due to the fact that it is in the public's best interest to have the opportunity to be educated on all available topics that fall under a museum's mission statement. Furthermore, the goal of this thesis includes putting forth recommendations on how museums can best exhibit these objects and subjects without being deemed controversial, and how best to handle such a situation if it proves to be controversial.

Research began with an extensive overview and study of the literature concerning controversial exhibitions and education in museums in the United States from their conception to the present day. Three controversial exhibitions were chosen: "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II" at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. in 1995, the Estate Sale Re-Enactment at Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1994, and "Sensation: Young British Artists

from the Saatchi Collection” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in Brooklyn, New York in 1997. These exhibitions were selected as case studies according to certain parameters: the museum is located in the United States, the exhibition took place in the 1990s at a volatile point during the Culture Wars, the museum received a large amount of nationwide media coverage in both newspapers, television and radio, and also from large public organizations, such as the NAACP.

In order to compare these controversies and their public responses, surveys were initially sent out to the institutions that held these exhibitions. These surveys recorded the museum’s visitor numbers, membership numbers, and donations for the year and month preceding the opening of the exhibition and following the closing of the exhibition, as well as during the exhibition itself. It soon became apparent, however, that even with this information it would be difficult to attribute a rise or fall in visitorship, memberships, or donations to the showing of an individual exhibition without considering other factors such as the price of gas, alternative leisure time activities in the area, and others.

Thus, it was decided that interviews would need to be held with a director or curator of six different institutions to determine their opinions, thoughts, and recommendations on the exhibiting of controversial topics and these case studies. Two museums were selected to parallel each of the aforementioned case studies in an attempt to provide a variety of results, and they are located in the state of Texas. Thus, to parallel the *Enola Gay* controversy at NASM, the American Airpower Heritage Museum in Midland and the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg were chosen due to their pertaining to World War II and aircrafts respectively. To correspond with the

estate sale reenactment of slaves at Colonial Williamsburg, the Bob Bullock Museum in Austin and the Barrington Living History Farm in Washington were chosen due to their coverage of Texas history during the slave period. Finally, for a comparison with the “Sensation” exhibition at the BMA, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin were chosen. Texas museum professionals were chosen so that the results of the study would be applicable to the area, since a larger sample size would have resulted in the recommendations being more generic.

These interviews were held both in person at the director’s home institution, or over the phone for the convenience of those being interviewed and for what their schedules would allow. Each director was asked to comment on the case study their institution was meant to parallel. The overall idea for this thesis was explained and the museum professional was asked to comment. Next, those interviewed were asked whether their individual institution would consider hosting a controversial exhibition, and if not, why. Also, the individuals were asked what their recommendations would be on how to exhibit potentially controversial topics without igniting public criticism. Finally, they were asked what they would have done if they were at the center of such a controversy, or what they think are the best ways to handle such situations. The results of these interviews will be relayed, whether or not they agree or conflict with the researcher or one another.

Furthermore, the result of the interviews, as well as the research done on controversial exhibitions in United States museums, will lead to a collection of various recommendations of best practices for museums on how best to present an exhibition with controversial objects or subject matter without creating a public furor. Also, it will



result in recommendations for the museum community on how best to handle a situation involving a controversial exhibition if the museum becomes involved in one.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

Before museum professionals are able to make recommendations of how best to present controversial exhibitions they should attempt to understand what methods and practices are already being used within the museum community, and they should attempt to understand the effectiveness of those methods. Also, by interviewing various museum professionals new ideas can be discovered from their experience in the museum community.

#### *Results of the Interviews with Six Museum Professionals*

##### *The American Airpower Heritage Museum*

The American Airpower Heritage Museum in Midland, Texas focuses on preserving the history of World War II military aviation and the memory of the men and women who built, serviced and flew the historic military aircraft of World War II. Thus, due to the institution's focus, it was chosen to parallel the case study of the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution.

The museum opened in 1991 in its current location, and every year for 4 years opened a new phase. In October 1995 the last phase opened with the exhibition "Fat Man, Little Boy; Birth of the Atomic Age." This exhibition was similar to the revised exhibition at the Air and Space Museum, and was planned and written in the months after its opening. According to the museum's director, Tami O'Bannion, the staff "very deliberately – through many sleepless nights – considered [their] options and took the

classic museum interpretation route in allowing [the] museum to become the forum to represent the people who lived it. Thereby, allowing the public to form their own opinions.” A great deal of planning and preparation went into the exhibition as the staff “was not eager to repeat the scenario” that occurred at the National Air and Space Museum. Despite the short amount of time, the exhibition came together quite well because the staff allowed “the people who actually wrote the letters, dropped the bomb, built the airplanes, built the secret weapons, trained the people, and the historical records, create the label copy” for the exhibition. Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, pilot of the *Enola Gay*, visited the exhibition and gave it a “thumbs up,” but only after he offered two suggestions.

This approach to exhibition design, the use of objects and archives that “lived” through the history in question, is the preferred method of the American Airpower Heritage Museum. They do not feel their representation of history is skewed or one sided. Their goal is not to “rewrite history, [but] present history as it happen[ed because] how do you argue with what happened.” Yet, many people do often argue with what happened in history since the victors are the ones who create the history books, thus introducing an opportunity for bias. To combat this factor, Ms. O’Bannion has “tried to give equal voice to both sides” in the form of multiple perspectives so that “the visitor [can] determine in their own mind and their own conscience how they feel about how history developed and unraveled.”

The American Airpower Heritage Museum also hosts paneled discussions for the benefits of its visitors. They invite individuals with similar and differing opinions on an issue for open discussion. This has been done in combination with exhibitions and as a

stand alone event. These forums have allowed the public to create their own opinions about history just as exhibitions do.

Comment books are readily available at the exit of the museum for visitors who wish to voice their opinions. For those who wish to speak directly to someone about their views, Ms. O'Bannion is available for contact. The general view of the museum, though, is positive, and the director has only had to deal with a few negative responses since the museum's opening in 1991. The "Fat Man, Little Boy" exhibition in 1995 received no negative responses in the exhibition's comment books, which was surprising since it opened four months after NASM's. Due to the low amount of negative responses aimed at the institution there is no written emergency media plan in place. The director, who is the face of the museum, handles all press coverage of the institution and opinions of the public on a case by case basis.

Ms. O'Bannion and her staff said they never shy away from controversial topics involved with their subject matter, nor do they withhold learning opportunities from their visitors. Their exhibits, based mainly on personal recollections, original objects, and archives, and forums, allow visitors ample opportunities to learn what they like and make their own opinions.

### *The National Museum of the Pacific War*

The National Museum of the Pacific War headed by Mr. Joe Cavanaugh is located in Fredericksburg, Texas, and focuses on history of World War II in terms of the battles on and over the Pacific Ocean. The museum boasts a collection of Allied and Japanese aircraft, tanks, guns and other large objects. This museum was chosen to parallel the *Enola Gay* case study due to the critical role of dropping the bomb played in ending the

war, and because the museum displays entire aircraft and a decommissioned nuclear bomb.

Many armed forces veterans have compared the museum to the National Air and Space Museum in that they express the hope in that the Museum of the Pacific War will not “do the same things they did at the Smithsonian with the *Enola Gay*.” As Mr. Cavanaugh pointed out, “that was over ten years ago” and it shows how a controversy can leave “ill feelings [that can] last a full generation.” Despite this, the museum’s staff realizes that they have a duty to their visitors to present history despite its emotional connections. Mr. Cavanaugh claims that the museum “does not glorify war, [but asks] what can we learn from [it], and that’s the perspective we approach these things from... [because] if you can’t learn from [history] then you’re doomed to repeat it.” Thus, it is the museum’s goal to teach visitors a balanced interpretation of the War in the Pacific despite the potentially negative connotations associated with some of the events.

One such exhibition, installed with the opening of their Bush Gallery in 1999, displayed photographs depicting the deaths of soldiers in battle and the treatment of prisoners of war in internment camps. This exhibition drew some negative responses, mostly from women and children, due to the blunt violence depicted. Mr. Cavanaugh stressed the fact that his museum does not glorify war, and it is their responsibility to show the negative aspects of war alongside the popular aspects. Also, the museum is mounting a temporary exhibition based around American bomber nose art, similar to the traveling exhibition being created by the AAHM. Some of the panels include cartoon female nudes, and “there were people offended by the nudity...and some were saying [the museum] should cover it.” From an exhibition standpoint Mr. Cavanaugh states that

covering the nudes on nose art is the equivalent to “cover[ing] the genitals of Michelangelo’s David.”

Due to such scenarios, the museum has set in place a media plan, which Mr. Cavanaugh believes all museums need regardless of size or mission. Their plan states that “one person is the spokesperson for the museum, who that person is, and [what they] can say and cannot say.” Media training is another important aspect for the success of the media plan, and Mr. Cavanaugh stresses that it is unacceptable for the spokesperson not to be media trained due to the number of available opportunities for such.

The best ways for the museum to prepare for an exhibition that might attract negative attention is to make sure they “do what the people of the *Enola Gay* did not do, and that is [to] make sure [they] address both sides of the issue with balance and without opinion.” Furthermore, Mr. Cavanaugh believed that if you deal with both sides they “may not like that you’re expressing the other side’s opinion, but they can’t say that their perspective was not equally expressed.” Thus, in his opinion the exhibitions portrayed at the National Museum of the Pacific War approach their subjects from multiple viewpoints and perspectives so that visitors are allowed the opportunity to learn about events from both sides and so that they can determine their own opinions on the subjects.

#### *The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum*

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas, is a history institution that strives to tell the “story” of the state of Texas through interactive exhibitions and educational programs. One of the subjects covered is the history of slavery in farming in Texas. Thus, this museum was chosen because it also attempts to educate visitors on the topic of slavery even though it is not a positive part of the state’s

history. Dr. Lynn Denton, director of the museum, discussed their coverage of this issue, and gave her opinion on the estate sale reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg, and her opinion on the coverage of controversial topics in museums. Dr. Denton did not personally view the reenactment but was aware of it and its aftermath from reading the museum community's literature.

The Texas History Museum has presented live events like the reenactment, specifically the "Willie Wells Story," in which an actor portrayed the African-American baseball player and shared his history for visitors. The event did express some of the hardships he faced as an African-American in society, but the topic of slavery and its hardships has not been tackled in this live action manor. While Dr. Denton was not necessarily against the idea, she knew that to present such a powerful drama, it would need to be clearly associated with an ongoing exhibition. She was aware that her constituency would have been confused by that type of reenactment taking place without it being associated with a current exhibition.

At the time of the interview, the Texas History Museum covered the issue of slavery on the second and third floors under the umbrella themes of building identity in Texas and opportunity on the land such as farming and ranching. Dr. Denton realized that their "coverage of slavery [was] not yet complete, [and] the exhibit team [was working] to readdress that area." The Texas History Museum did bring in a traveling exhibition in the spring of 2006, "A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*." The exhibition showcased artifacts recovered from a British merchant ship, the *Henrietta Marie*, which sunk off the coast of Florida in 1700 after selling its human cargo in Jamaica. A pair of iron shackles used for restraining slaves was even displayed as a

part of the exhibition, and even though the show covered an emotional subject it was very positively received by the museum's visitors.

The positive reactions may have been due to the way the exhibition was presented to visitors. Dr. Denton understood that “presenting multiple viewpoints [and] working with community leaders or decision makers in advance so that input is incorporated into the exhibition scope and perspective” was very important. Also, “when an institution intentionally seeks to present a controversial subject in order to provide a forum for public discussion and engagement” the subject must be adequately prepared for and approached correctly so that the desired environment is achieved. If an open and positive environment is not achieved or visitors perceive the exhibition as unbalanced or insensitive, it could become controversial and receive unwanted negative public and media attention.

Visitors are allowed to express opinions in the form of “visitor comment cards, questionnaires in the special exhibition galleries, periodic intercept surveys, member surveys, and through [the museum's] web site.” The responses are all reviewed and addressed by the museum's staff whether they are positive or negative. In such scenarios involving the media, the Texas History Museum has procedures set in place to assure that only certain individuals are speaking with the press. The procedures for various situations are outlined in the museum's emergency media plan which clarifies “who is authorized to make decisions and speak on the museum's behalf.” Furthermore, these individuals should have proper media training so as to be able to answer all questions accurately and responsibly.



Unlike others interviewed, Dr. Denton did not identify any one specific cause for controversy in museum, such as misinformation or politics. This is because she believes “there is no single answer as each situation is unique and each institution audience and community responds uniquely.” Thus, a museum staff should understand their audiences and conduct the appropriate preparation and groundwork.

### *The Barrington Living History Farm*

The Barrington Living History Farm in Washington, Texas, is part of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation and under the direction of the site manager, Mr. Bill Irwin. It represents the farm land of Anson Jones, the last president of the Republic of Texas and includes the original home inhabited by the family, and the recreated kitchen, smokehouse, barn, garden, animal pens, and slave quarters. The home was moved to land owned by Texas Parks and Wildlife, where it and the remainder of the structures are laid out according to their original locations. Due to the recently reconstructed slave quarters and their interpretation, the Barrington Farm was chosen to correspond with the Colonial Williamsburg reenactment example.

At the Barrington Farm the interpretive style included a dialog and discussion between interpreter and visitor rather than a guided tour or exhibit situation. During a personal tour, guide Pam Scaggs delivered information in a third person format and answered all questions without hesitation. This was the most desired approach for the Barrington Farm because Mr. Irwin believed the only way to approach the subject of slavery is honestly and by putting forward all known information. He also believed that their coverage of slavery was satisfactory “but others would probably consider it cautious. [They] don’t ignore slavery; [they] address it in [their] daily interpretation.”

Yet he did express a desire for “African American interpreters, but since [they] aren’t doing a first person [approach he believed] it isn’t critical.”

The approach of using guides for discussion was also utilized so that visitors were afforded the opportunity of providing feedback immediately, whether positive or negative, so that it can be addressed directly if desired. Also, “visitor complaints are directed to [the Barrington Farm’s] agency or a political official, i.e. the Governor’s Office, and it works down the chain of command for the Site Manager to address.” Once Mr. Irwin receives these responses he contacts the visitor directly and discusses the visitor’s views and opinions and explains those of the Barrington Farm.

Besides the day tours, special events were held throughout the year such as on the weekend celebrating Texas independence. In March 2001, on Texas independence weekend, the Barrington Farm held a play entitled “Sweet Bye and Bye” written by Naomi Carrier Grundy. This play consisted of different scenes at various buildings and locations throughout the farm and revealed the day to day life of a slave. Visitors were allowed to view the scenes in any order as they were repeated throughout the day across the site. Approximately 500 people viewed the play each day over the long weekend. Guides were on hand at each scene to answer questions and provide additional information if desired. Despite the emotional subject matter, the event was very successful, and the staff received positive responses from those who saw it.

Slavery has often caused controversy at institutions that have covered it. This is because it is not only a political issue but an emotional one as well. Also, Mr. Irwin understood that

controversy often equates to emotion and there are some emotional arguments you will never be able to turn to positives. [Their] job is not to

decide what is good or bad, who is right or wrong. Stick to the story you feel needs to be told. Tell it from as many points of view as possible and let the visitor draw their own conclusions.

Thus, by utilizing multiple viewpoints – those of the slave, the owner, and the families of each for example – visitors have been able to take what they feel is important from the site and interpret it in their own ways.

Also, before a new event or tour approach was planned Mr. Irwin and his staff asked themselves several questions because “as interpreters, [they] have a story [they] want to tell and sometimes [they] forget that there are different agendas, emotional connections and cultural perspectives that have the potential to make any story controversial.” These questions included:

Is the story we want to tell biased in view point, emotionally charged or motivated by an agenda? If so is that really the story we need or want to tell? Can we tell it in a way that fulfills our mission, is inclusive and allows individuals to reach their own conclusion through insight?

In his mind, this allowed for them to tell the story of slavery on the farm without it being controversial. However, if an aspect of the farm was ever found as such he is ready to “respond in a professional manner backed with research that is evenhanded.” Mr. Irwin believed that “even if [an exhibit or event] creates controversy it [can] lead to critical thinking and if it addresses multiple points of view without forming conclusions [then] controversy may be a good thing.”

### *The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston*

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in Houston, Texas, has been headed by Ms. Marti Mayo, director, since 1994. Ms. Mayo was a curator from 1980 to 1986. During her time at the museum several exhibitions have occurred that ran the risk of

causing offense. Thus, the Contemporary Arts Museum was chosen to parallel the example of the “Sensation” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art because both institutions exhibit contemporary art.

Ms. Mayo did not view the “Sensation” exhibition during its time in Brooklyn, but she did see it in London where it originally opened. She said that if the show still existed and was offered to the museum she would definitely bring “Sensation” to Houston. One exhibition the Contemporary Arts Museum hosted that might have been controversial was an exhibition on Andres Serrano, creator of the piece “Piss Christ.” In an attempt to prepare the community for the exhibition, the institution took a variety of steps. One included speaking with a number of Houston religious leaders. The museum staff “explained the artist’s point of view, [that it was his] comment on what some religions were doing to society today” and that it was not a comment on religion or Christianity itself. They also prepared press releases which defined the purpose and importance of the exhibition clearly. Finally, members of the media were invited to meet with the artist prior to the exhibition opening so they could see the exhibition for themselves.

As a result of these preparatory actions the exhibition on Serrano did not receive any negative attention from the media or the general public. Instead it was received quite positively. This was important because Ms. Mayo knew that a controversial exhibition could “leave a bad taste among the constituency of the institution [and] take a long time to go away.” In the case with “Sensation” she estimated that it would affect the Brooklyn Museum of Art years to come.

The Contemporary Arts Museum does provide comment books for visitor at the end of exhibitions or at the exit of the museum, and any individual who wishes to make their opinion known is provided with the Director's contact information so that they can speak to Ms. Mayo directly. This is a written procedure at the Contemporary Arts Museum since "most people just want to be heard, want to express their opinion, and even while [she] may not agree with their opinion [she] thinks it is important to listen."

Despite the possibility that the Serrano exhibition could have brought negative attention to the museum, Ms. Mayo felt it was still important to bring the works of this important contemporary artist to the community. Whenever an exhibition was in the planning stages, Ms. Mayo would ask herself and her staff a single question. Is "the work important enough to warrant the kind of time and attention needed to deal with it; if they think it is, [they] show it. They have never determined a show or artist [to be] too controversial." Yet, Ms. Mayo was unable to think of an exhibition that they have not shown for this reason.

Furthermore, she felt that one reason exhibitions were found to be controversial was because the public bases their opinions on misinformation. Furthermore, it is very important for the museum to have a single voice and point of view. Thus, only Ms. Mayo and the Contemporary Arts Museum head of public relations are allowed to make any remarks to the press. Also, she claimed it was extremely important for those who speak with the press to be media trained so that they could "be prepared for questions...the most uncomfortable questions [and] be able to answer them with ease...[as that] allows people to hear your point of view and make up their own mind, which is all the public wants to do." She also claims

that it is not about trying to fool the press, which is a terrible mistake; it's not about trying to ignore the press, which is also a mistake. It's about [the museum] being out in front of the press and being straight forward, open, honest, putting [the museum's] position forward in a way which is understandable...When the press thinks there is more of a story they start digging around.

Also, the public will think there is something else behind the exhibition and view it cynically.

Another reason Ms. Mayo believes exhibitions are considered controversial is because of "politics – not content," and that "it's not really about obscenity or freedom of expression. It's about politics" in that other people use the exhibition to create controversy around a certain topic. She claimed that

generally when these things blow up it's always from a corner where somebody's in deep trouble in an election. It is very easy because you can call something obscene in a sound bite, but cannot defend it in a sound bite.

She continued by giving an example. "The Serrano/Mapplethorpe thing was at a time when North Carolinian Jesse Helms was in real big trouble and running neck in neck with [his opponent]." This coincides with the statement Chris Ofili made about the conflict over the "Sensation" exhibition actually being about the upcoming senatorial election between Giuliani and Clinton and not about his actual piece.

Finally, Ms. Mayo was extremely clear in her belief that while the community has a say in what the museum exhibits, if the professionals at the museum believe the work to be of artistic value, a disgruntled few, politician or others, should not.

### *The Blanton Museum of Art*

The Blanton Museum of Art directed by Ms. Jessie Otto Hite is an institution under the umbrella of the University of Austin in Austin, Texas. It recently opened a new

facility on the campus to increase the amount of exhibition room, and exhibits art from a variety of genres including contemporary and modern art. Thus, it was chosen to correspond with the case study of the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

When an exhibition is proposed for the Blanton it must be “reviewed in an exhibitions committee. The curator gives a presentation on it and as museum professionals [they] look at it and judge whether [they] want to take it based on merit.” The artistic merit is what Ms. Hite stressed the most. The amount on controversy surrounding an exhibition should not be a considering factor, but instead the artistic merit behind the exhibition. “For example, [she] would support the Mapplethorpe exhibition because there [was] artistic merit behind it.”

While Ms. Hite stated she would not object to the exhibition of the pieces from the “Sensation” exhibition in Brooklyn, but she would object to the amount of Mr. Saatchi’s involvement in the exhibition planning. She feels “it is not right for the donors to have control, especially a donor who is not just a donor of art, but of money for the exhibition too.” Although, before opening an exhibition like Sensation a number of steps would need to be taken.

The most important being the notification of the community. Ms. Hite states “you have to prepare your public for what this is and why you are doing it. You have to say we’re putting this forward because it has this and this merit.” The inclusion of community leaders and others who would be offended or take issue with the exhibition is a necessity. Furthermore, the Blanton like “a lot of museums put together focus groups or community advisory committees” so that they are aware of the opinions and concerns.

This keeps the community aware of the activities at the museum which decreases the possibility of surprising the public and causing disapproval.

Visitors are allowed the opportunity to leave feedback for museum staff on the institution itself and on individual exhibitions through “comment cards and a visitor service staff.” These opinions are addressed by the visitor service staff and in extreme circumstances by the director Ms. Hite herself. Furthermore, the Blanton’s website lists the contact information, phone number and email address, for every major staff member including the director. This allows visitors direct contact with anyone they feel needs to hear their suggestions and/or concerns.

In the event that an exhibition is featured in the media in a negative manner the museum has on staff trained personnel in the public affairs department that can respond. Furthermore, the Blanton “has a relationship with a major public relations firm in New York that [they] can turn to, [as well as] the office of Public Affairs at the University.” These two offices as well as the department at the institution are composed of media trained individuals that are aware of the information they are and not allowed to release and discuss with the media, as well as the best methods for doing so.

Finally, Ms. Hite stated that the Blanton “would not shy away from a show because it had difficult content, but [they] would want to think about the audience and how to communicate it.” Also, that exhibition’s should be at the discretion of the museum staff and not influenced by those who are the donors behind them.

### *Conclusion*

The results from these interviews comprised a multitude of opinions and perspectives on past controversial exhibitions in museums, the causes of such



controversy, and personal practices for presenting such exhibitions. These opinions varied slightly from individual to individual possibly due to the size or type of museum, or gender of the interviewee. By integrating the opinions discussed from these interviews with the practices covered in the museum communities, literature recommendations can be created on how to present most effectively an exhibition for visitors on a topic that might otherwise incite controversy.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Conclusion

Six Texas museums were chosen based on their subject matter, to correspond with the three case studies examined for this thesis. I spoke with the Director/Manager or Curator from each of these institutions in order to ascertain their opinions on the case studies that were identified as ones that paralleled with their institutions as well as their personal opinions, as professionals in the museum community, on controversy in museums and the results of such. From these interviews I have learned how similar most of the opinions are across the state of Texas, but also how they can vary depending on the type of institution. Also, I gained a number of ideas for how best to plan and execute an exhibition based on an emotional topic without it igniting controversy, as well as how best to address that scenario.

#### *Recommendations for Executing a Possibly Controversial Exhibition*

Most of the museum professionals I spoke with claimed they would exhibit the controversial show in question, or a close variation of it. In fact, some have already done so. For instance, the American Airpower Museum opened their exhibition “Fat Man, Little Boy; Birth of the Atomic Age” only months after the Smithsonian opened their revised exhibition portraying the *Enola Gay*. Only one institution, the Texas History Museum, which was paralleled with the estate sale reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg, stated that it would not be able to host the reenactment unless it were associated with an exhibition since it could not be shown without context. Furthermore,

the personal responses to the exhibitions in question were positive in terms of content, although not necessarily in how they were handled.

Museums should be affirmative in reaching out for diverse perspectives. In doing so, museums will improve the quality of exhibits and reflect the multiplicity of views present in a pluralistic democracy. Those selected to create the exhibit should include representatives of the diverse groups, whole cultures, and environments [that] are reflected in the exhibit.<sup>104</sup>

This opinion on how to put together an exhibition so that it is balanced and honest towards the subject was repeated in all of the interviews. This was generally achieved by utilizing multiple perspectives or viewpoints on the topic so that all sides of the issue are covered equally. These perspectives have been portrayed through archival documents such as letters, diaries, and oral histories from the time of the event. Another possibility included the addition of information obtained from people who currently have an interest or personal connection to the event or subject in question. This information can be combined and included in the form of additional labels, quotes in an audio guide, or interviews in a video. By allowing each voice involved in the event or issue at hand to be addressed visitors can be allowed the opportunity to make their own decisions and opinions.

Furthermore, to portray these multiple perspectives several presentation options are available, but everyone I spoke with stressed the necessity for a balance between the artifacts and the text. An exhibition cannot be successful with only text panels, even if the information on them is in the form of archival materials. The use of artifacts alongside the information and archival material can help it come to life for the visitor. Also, this approach can affect textual learners and visual learners alike. This was clearly

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<sup>104</sup>Willard L. Boyd, "Museums as Centers of Controversy," in *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 1999, 202.

evident at the Museum of the Pacific War with its exhibition of war time photos. Text panels can explain the numbers of those who died in the conflicts, and the unhealthy weights of an individual POW's upon rescue, but photographs make the statistics real.

Also, the personal opinions of the museum staff and the exhibition developers should not come through in the exhibition itself. It is imperative that the information and artifacts are presented in a non-biased and completely objective manner. Otherwise, visitors will not be able to create their own feelings on the subject, but would most likely take on the opinion before them. Furthermore, the opinions of the museum staff or the exhibition developers may not be based on correct information, and if the facts of the subject are not accurately portrayed, visitors may believe that the museum is not an appropriate learning environment for themselves or their families. In the worst case scenario, they may believe they cannot trust the institution to give them truthful information.

Another important factor in hosting an exhibition that might be controversial is the involvement of the local community in the planning stages of the show. By involving groups of people who may have an emotional connection to the issue, the museum can explain its rationale for the exhibition or their general point of view can be explained while also ascertaining and acknowledging differing perspectives. Furthermore, by including the people of the community early in the exhibition's planning stages they will not be shocked or blindsided when the exhibition opens. "The American Association of Museums provides suggestions such as 'improv[ing] communication between... [the] different communities and museums,' 'demonstrate, through action, the opportunities museums have to serve diverse and often culturally underrepresented citizens,' and to

‘empower communities [to help them] deal with contemporary problems through cooperative strategies.’<sup>105</sup> The Contemporary Arts Museum utilized this approach when it exhibited the show that focused on Andres Serrano. By going to the various religious leaders throughout the Houston community, the museum was able to explain why they believed it was important for the exhibition to be shown, to explain the artist’s point of view, and to acknowledge the diverse views in the community as well.

These suggestions will greatly help during the planning stages of an exhibition, but the possibility of inciting disapproval still exists. Thus, further measurements were recommended for the duration of the exhibition. First of all, if the museum staff believes an exhibition will be received negatively by the media once it opens then members of the press should be invited to the exhibition opening. It has been seen, especially with the estate sale reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg, that misinformation is a large factor in museum controversy. So by allowing the media to view the exhibition’s opening alongside visitors they would be allowed to form their own opinions while being provided with accurate information by the staff.

Also, the inclusion of on-hand guides throughout the exhibition has been found beneficial. They do not conduct full tours but would be available for guests to utilize should they have a question, require clarification, or seek an alternative interpretation compared to the one presented by the staff. The Contemporary Arts Museum has recently put this idea into practice. The guides were art and art history students from nearby universities, thus they appeared much more approachable to visitors than curators

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<sup>105</sup>American Association of Museums, *Museums in the Life of a City: Strategies for Community Partnerships* (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1995), 12.

or staff members while also being extremely knowledgeable about the topic of the exhibition.

These recommendations may not be possible at all types of museums but appear to have had positive results at the six museums that were studied. It is significant that these recommendations were made individually by different museum professionals and without encouragement or direction from the researcher. Thus, it is clear that these ideas are not new, but are merely underutilized within the field.

#### *Recommendations for Handling the Responses to a Controversial Exhibition*

Exhibitions are considered controversial when they receive negative attention from the general public and the media. The responses to the exhibition can be gained through comment books or cards, letters, interviews, protests, bulletins, and petitions. Such options are innumerable. Despite the many outlets available, an assortment of methods for handling such opinions can be used without causing further disapproval or damage to the institution.

In all of the interviews conducted the most frequent recommendation was having an emergency media plan with a well trained individual on staff to exercise it. Such plans, considered by some to be a necessity for all museums, have included a hierarchy of staff members that are allowed to converse with the press and act as spokespersons for the institution. Also, museum staff should formulate written procedures for a variety of possible scenarios and situations, not just those associated with controversial exhibitions. Mr. Cavanaugh went so far as to state that the media plan should cover every scenario up to and including an individual dying on museum premises. Furthermore, the procedures should outline what types of information the spokesperson is and is not allowed to release

to the press. Finally, these plans should be updated as well as approved annually by the museum's highest staff members and board members to accommodate the constant increase in media outlets and to assure its effectiveness.

In terms of the individuals chosen to speak on the museum's behalf with the media spotlight, a majority of those interviewed specified that this duty should only be assigned to the director of the institution or the head of the public relations department. It was also stressed that media training is a necessity for these individuals, and to lack this training is unacceptable as it is readily available through museum professional organizations, seminars, and similar venues. This type of training provides individuals with the proper methods for answering all types of questions. For example, as Ms. Mayo pointed out, one should never respond to a question for which they do not fully know the answer, but instead should state that they are not sure of the answer but is looking into it. Also, training provides valuable practice and experience; a lack of such experience would almost certainly place the spokesperson and the museum in a stressful and dangerous situation. Like the revisions to the plan itself, this training should also be given or undertaken annually so as to have practice.

There were some differences in the opinions of those interviewed in the amount of response necessary in dealing with the media after receiving negative publicity. These variations are probably because the sample included different types of museums or may have been merely differences in the opinions of the museum professionals interviewed. Some believed that only a press release was needed to concisely explain the museum's reasoning an exhibition. Others believed it more appropriate to speak directly to reporters and to show them through the exhibition in an effort to help them understand as

well as to provide accurate information. The amount of responses on the part of the museum would be entirely situational. It would depend on the amount of coverage the museum is receiving since “the museum staff has the ultimate responsibility to decide exhibit content. Its freedom to do so needs to be understood and defended both within and without the museum, just as a university would defend academic freedom.”<sup>106</sup>

A museum’s patrons should also be allowed to voice their opinions and reflections, whether through comment books, comment cards, or directly to members of the staff. There are a number of ways for a museum staff to respond so that visitors believe they have been sufficiently heard while the museum retains its constituency. Comment areas can be located at the exit of an individual exhibition or at the exit of the museum. These areas should provide visitors with some type of outlet for their opinions. Furthermore, they may not even want a response from the museum, but would merely like for their thoughts to be heard. In terms of documentation and record keeping for the institution, a bound comment book would be more desirable. Also, this approach may make a visitor feel more at ease. On the other hand, having a staff member in place to field comments and make notes on them for documentation purposes can be better for a visitor because they would be provided with automatic feedback. The drawback to this approach is that the visitor may not feel comfortable in approaching staff members.

Generally, it is not feasible to respond to all of the visitor comments, whether in books, on cards, or with staff members. Thus, only those that are negative in content should be responded to, if contact information for the visitor is available. All six museum professionals interviewed stated that usually the small amounts of negative comments they do receive are handled by the director of the institution. In the case of the

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<sup>106</sup>Willard L. Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy,” 200.



Contemporary Arts Museum visitors are provided with the director's contact information for their convenience. At the Barrington Farm the comments are submitted to Texas Parks and Wildlife where they are read by various individuals before reaching the site manager who again personally contacts visitors to discuss their concerns. Reaching out directly will most likely make visitors feel their concerns or suggestions are appreciated.

Like the recommendations made for the planning and executing of an exhibition, adopting these suggestions will also vary according to the size and staff number of an institution. Furthermore, these suggestions are based on highly situational scenarios, and must be tailored as such for each individual instance. If the museum puts in place a well thought out and written media plan, less effort and time will be necessary to tailor their responses.

#### *Notable Topics from the Interviews*

During the interview of each of the six museum professionals I asked various questions concerning controversy in museums in general. The answers were much more varied than those concerning the individual exhibitions they were paralleling.

The most interesting result concerned the various thoughts as to why controversy seems to be afflicting our institutions. Dr. Denton at the Texas History Museum claimed she couldn't make a generalization about it because it is too situational due to both the exhibitions themselves and the hosting institutions. Ms. Mayo, on the other hand, claims a major reason for controversy is politics, and she suspects there is a pattern between controversial exhibitions and local and federal election years. These two opinions, however, might be explained by the difference in museum type. Others, such as Ms. O'Bannion and Mr. Cavanaugh mentioned familial involvement in the decision to view

exhibitions. This inferred that parents should determine beforehand if an exhibition is appropriate for themselves and their children. Most likely controversy results from a blend of these two factors as well as several others. Also, everyone I spoke with claimed that they do not place age restrictions on their exhibitions, but they do use disclaimers or warning signs when they deem it necessary. Thus, the majority of the responsibility is left to the visitors themselves.

Another intriguing aspect of the interviews concerned the answers I received when asking about how the museums handle negative responses. Although each had an answer ready for me, most likely due to a written procedure, they all stressed that their institutions receive few negative responses, at most zero to five comments per year. This answer surprised me about some institutions due to their size and type, such as the Texas History Museum and Contemporary Arts Museum, and others such as the Barrington Farm, the American Airpower Museum, and the Museum of the Pacific War due to their subject matter.

Finally, similarities that I noticed among all the interviewees were their opinions on controversy itself. Most claimed that they did not understand why a lot of exhibitions were considered controversial, because as long as the information and artifacts that were being presented were accurate and genuine then they should have no opposition. For example, both the American Airpower Museum and the Museum of the Pacific War are building exhibitions based on World War II aircraft nose art, which is classified as folk art. Yet, at both institutions a concern has been raised about the nudity portrayed on the panels. The fact remains though that the pieces are art, and as such they represent opinions. In history exhibitions, some interviewees claimed that the past is well recorded

and documented, and even with the bias of these documentations, the truths and facts about certain events and time periods cannot be denied or hidden. Thus, as long as the museum presents the multiple perspectives honestly and objectively, controversy over the topic should not emerge.

### *Conclusion*

When this project began I felt that I was approaching the subject objectively. In other words, I did not think I had any preference towards one side of this issue or the other, but as the study continued and I delved further into the literature I found myself firmly on the side of freedom of interpretation. Furthermore, I now look at exhibitions with a cynical eye – paying more attention to what information is missing than is present, and ask the question of why certain facts, opinions, or perspectives have been omitted.

Controversy within museums is inescapable “because [they] preserve, and often define, the changing conventions of social understanding, [thus] museum exhibitions cannot escape cultural turmoil.”<sup>107</sup> Only preparation and forethought can lessen the negative effects of an exhibition. “No complex topic can be free of controversy, [but] if an exhibition results from the marriage of scholarly research and the concerns of the represented group and the community, curators should be confident about their interpretations in the face of criticism.”<sup>108</sup> This confidence on the part of the curator is

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<sup>107</sup>Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, xxv.

<sup>108</sup>Mercedes J. Quintos, “Museum Presentations of Slavery: The Problems of Evidence and the Challenge of Representation,” 1999, 10; available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~mstd/publications/1999/mercedes%20quintos.pdf>; Internet; accessed 7 December 2006.

not referring to their personal career, but instead to the competence and effort of their staff, which is a necessity because

when an institution speaks it carries more weight than an individual – more than an expert. The museum profession is ever conscious of the fact that the institution essentially authenticates the objects and the ideas of an exhibit. Such institutional power of speech carries with it great privilege and ever greater responsibility to the audience.<sup>109</sup>

I believe that the six individuals interviewed for this work understood these facts.

Also, after interviewing the six museum professionals I quickly realized that there was far less self-censorship occurring, than I could recognize or had previously believed. Also, despite the differences in the museums themselves, location, size, staff number, and subject matter, all of the interviewees shared many of the same opinions that merely varied in terms of degree, which was most likely a reflection of the institution differences. Overall though, none of the professionals believed that they, or their institutions, were attempting to portray anything other than the truth to their visitors thus educating them to their fullest abilities, and that preparation and planning comprised the key to any successful exhibition, regardless of topic.

Lonnie Bunch, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, put it best:

Museums would be better served if they explained to the public why history museums explore social history that includes difficult questions of race, class, and gender, and why it is important for art museums to examine artists whose work challenges the community norms and expectations. It is not enough to say that 'we know best'...[M]useums can teach visitors more about points of view, the scholarly underpinnings of museum work, and the inherent fluidity of museum interpretation. As the clothing store advertisement extols, 'an educated consumer is the best consumer.'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Willard L. Boyd, "Museums as Centers of Controversy," 200.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

Museums can and should be presenting those issues that might incite controversy, but it should be done honestly with adequate preparation and explanation to visitors as well as to the surrounding community. Then museums will be able to educate their visitors, as their mission statements claim, by inspiring instead of offending.

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