Who Says So? Voices in the Museum World

By Carolyn Gilman

There was a Midwestern science museum that had an Olmec stone head it wanted to display. The Olmecs were inhabitants of Mexico (ca. 1,000 BC to 1,000 AD) who left behind much monumental sculpture, including huge, stylized carved heads.

This museum had a minority advisory committee that routinely commented on exhibit plans. A member of the committee suggested that they add to the label that the facial features of Olmec heads have been cited as evidence that African explorers and settlers colonized Central America long before Europeans.

The curator of Central American ethnology objected, maintaining that there was no objective evidence for this theory of African influence and that it had the status of politically correct pseudo-science. The museum's education division, on the other hand, argued that it was important to demonstrate sensitivity to minority viewpoints and not limit the definition of truth to those "truths" sanctioned by white male Western scientists.

In the end, the education division prevailed — the label citing African influence went up.

Another Midwestern museum was working on a cooperative project to produce a traveling exhibit on the history of an important community organization. In the 1970s, this organization had become embroiled in some controversies that resulted in its being picketed by CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) and a labor union. When the historians proposed including two pictures of picketers in the exhibit, there were objections. The photos painted the organization in a bad light, said its continued on page 4

President's Column

by Ross Corson

The focus on history in this issue of The Forum is no accident. It's a deliberate contrast to all the loose talk these days about "the future." Some of this talk is excited, eagerly expectant; some is anxious, even despairing.

But whether it's cyberspace, multiculturalism or the global economy — either everything is going to rot (real quick) . . . or we're all going to be saved (real soon) by some brave new technological or spiritual intervention.

Of course, we've never seen this turbulent state of affairs before! The point is: We have seen it — many, many times before. It's easy to let our imaginations see whatever we want on the Rorschach card of "the future." It's harder to recognize the familiar patterns in so much of what we do imagine. While history, too, can be seen as just another ink blot, historical experience can also inform the imagination.

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The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late 20th century. Most young men and women at the century’s end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in.

Unfortunately, “young men and women” are hardly the only ones suffering from amnesia. Some of our elders (if Newt Gingrich can be called that) seem to be terminal cases. So, when everyone is busy looking ahead to the next century, we thought it might be worthwhile to look the other way — at the century now coming to an end.

This fall, the Forum initiates a series of monthly symposia on America in the 20th century. Our kick-off symposium is on Saturday, September 16, at 10:00 a.m. The theme is “A Century of Three Revolutions? 1930s, 1960s, 1990s.”

The keynote speaker is Arthur Naftalin. Although he retired a few years ago as a professor at the University of Minnesota, Art is well known for some other roles: mayor of Minneapolis during much of the 1960s, longtime host of “Minnesota Issues” on Twin Cities Public Television and a key figure in the merger of Minnesota’s Democratic and Farmer Labor parties. Art offers a rare breadth of experience and knowledge to help us make sense of what’s happened in this century. Responding to his keynote address will be an impressive and diverse group of panelists.

The series will continue on October 28 (“Who’s an American? Struggles of Unity and Diversity”) and November 11 (“Americans at Work”). The Minnesota Historical Society is a co-sponsor, so the programs will be held at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul.

Thanks to Forum Board members Jack Parker and Brooke Portmann for their leadership in organizing this series.

Finally, a few words about the four “Works in Progress” programs which we sponsored this spring to provide an opportunity for “intellectual collegiality” and independent scholars to discuss their current research.

Each of these programs inspired a lively discussion, thanks to excellent presentations by: Pat HirL Longstaff on telecommunications policy; Jeremy Iggers on food and American culture; John Bessler on the history of executions; and Barbara Pirie on cross-cultural understanding.

Please let us know your suggestions for future programs.
A Library of the Renaissance and Reformation

by John Parker

One of the historian's most difficult tasks is to recover the context of past events: the intellectual climate, the conventional wisdom, of a past time. The largely secular age in which we live makes it especially difficult for us to fully understand an era in which social and political issues were often closely allied to religious establishments or movements, frequently involving religious leaders and the vocabulary of religion.

For scholars investigating European history in the 16th and first half of the 17th centuries, a valuable new resource is developing in our community.

At Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary (2375 Como Avenue in St. Paul), the Lutheran Brotherhood Foundation Reformation Research Library is creating a vast microfilm resource based on the holdings of many libraries, most of them in Europe.

The Library is collecting some 8,200 texts for microfilming and entering into the Research Library Information Network (RLIN) data base system. At present more than 4,600 items have been entered, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities will carry the project forward during the next two years.

Sources of these materials are major libraries in Germany, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, the Library has subscribed to existing microfilm series that fit the project's scope and timeframe, and it will be exploring further possibilities for materials in Scandinavian libraries.

There is no other comparable resource in North America — the most similar being the Center for Reformation Research in St. Louis, which is much more restricted in its scope.

While a major emphasis on the Protestant and Catholic Reformation pervades the materials, they also relate directly to political ideas and institutions, contemporary concepts of universities and education in general, attitudes toward the arts and literature, and other topics of public concern. It was, after all, in the Reformation period that we find the roots of modern capitalism, of aspects of modern science, the beginnings of a truly global economy, the rise of the merchant class and its struggle for position in government with a corresponding decline in the power of the landed classes.

Books are assuredly the best road back into the minds of an earlier time, and one cannot separate any social or intellectual movement of the 16th century from the invention of the printing press, which gave wide currency to the flood of ideas that were at the heart of the Renaissance. Not only what was new came to the press, but defenses of the old order in church and state and home were equally at large for the public purview.

With a scope that encompasses all of Europe, the microfilm project enables the scholar to trace the spread of ideas through the vast pamphlet literature that carried them. And the chronological juxtaposition of widely different disciplines becomes apparent in a collection of books:

Copernicus reordered the universe while trying to reform the church calendar; Jesuit missionaries traveled to their stations in merchant ships; as slavery and exploitation went forward, so did the work of lawyers and theologians trying to justify or alleviate it.

At Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary we are offered the opportunity to travel back into the Reformation and Renaissance period. The microfilm collection supplements a substantial rare book library with a similar scope. The curator of the library and director of the microfilm project is Terrance L. Dinovo. He will welcome your inquiries.
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officials, and they would only cause bad feeling and reopen
old wounds.

Within the museum there was disagreement. One faction
maintained that there was no valid reason for censoring the
historical record. The other faction felt that the collaborative
relationship with the other organization was more impor-
tant than any abstract responsibility to history. They argued
that cooperation meant yielding curatorial control and not
dictating people’s own history to them.

In this instance a compromise had to be reached. The two
offending pictures were banned from the exhibit whenever it
was shown under the auspices of the community organization;
when the museum showed it, they were included.

These stories illustrate what a cacophony of voices exhibit
developers deal with today. Within the institution, the team
process has broken down the traditional fiefdom of the cura-
tor. Now exhibits are expected to reflect the varied perspec-
tives of the curator, educator, designer, historian or scientist, and
even the PR and development departments. Meanwhile, the
trend toward community involvement has made museums
reach out to listen to the voices of minorities, women, workers,
neighborhood groups, ethnic groups, the disabled and others
traditionally excluded. “Who says so?” isn’t just an abstract
question; it’s a continual tug-of-war in our lives.

Museums everywhere are trying to shed their exclusionary and
elitist roles. For years they functioned as shrines to the
powerful and repositories for the dominant culture’s values. As
the waves of interest in “everyday history,” cultural diversity
and excluded groups swept through academia and on into
the nonprofit world during the late 1980s, museums became
aware of how restrictive were the stories they told and the
sources they used to tell them.

In 1992, the American Association of Museums (AAM) pub-
lished Excellence and Equity, which declared a revised blue-
print for the role of the modern museum, emphasizing educa-
tion, public service, inclusiveness and “ongoing collaborative
efforts” with the community. In addressing exhibit interpreta-
tion, it called for an “interpretive process [that] manifests
variety in cultural and intellectual perspectives and reflects an
appreciation for the diversity of museums’ public.”

Because the stories of neglected and disenfranchised groups
were seldom preserved in traditional archives and their
belongings were not part of museum collections, curators
were forced to reach out into the community to gather oral
histories, locate artifacts and forge connections with other
organizations. Advisory committees of community representa-
tives began to participate in the exhibit development pro-
cess. Many museums have formed standing committees to
advise them on minority viewpoints.

Exhibits have already reaped many benefits. We have been
forced to acknowledge the limits of the traditional curatorial
perspective that focused on taxonomic categories of artifacts
and was preoccupied with classification and connoisseur-
ship. We have reached out in three directions:

- Exhibit topics have expanded, allowing us to reflect a more
  comprehensive past and encompass alternative perspectives.

- Historical sources have expanded, allowing us to incorpo-
  rate the richness of memory in exhibits and explore subjective
  responses to the past.

- The process of exhibit development has expanded, allowing
  us to forge institutional links with other organizations and tap
  into the reservoir of knowledge outside the institution.

People find it easier to see themselves in the new exhibits.
Museums today are becoming more relevant to the communi-
ties they serve and better posi-
tioned to engage in the important discussions of our day.

But as we revolutionize the museum’s role, we need to remember the strengths that we are building on. The traditional museum was not merely an irrelevant, benighted repository for elitism. It had a role in the community, and that role is the basis of the authority with which museums still speak.

Back in the days when people believed that there was such a thing as The Truth, museums had it. Museums were places you went to see the real thing — the authentic artifact, the original manuscript, the true story. And our supposed possession of The Truth was not without foundation. It was based on the rigor of the Western scholarly tradition with its demanding criteria for determining truth.

Curators ideally were held to some pretty exacting standards. They were assumed to be informed and up-to-date in their fields. Like most scholars, they were trained at evaluating evidence, weighing conflicting claims and drawing conclusions. Their role was to winnow real information from pseudo-information; to sort the significant from the trivial; to place isolated facts in a context that helped them make sense. They were supposed to treat their subject with scientific detachment, with neutrality and balance. Above all, they were paid to draw conclusions that they could back up with sources and arguments when submitting to critique by their peers. The assumption was that they would arrive at accurate — or at least defendable — explanations, which could then be presented to the public with a fair confidence that no one was being misled.

In the past twenty years we have witnessed an assault on traditional historical scholarship by those who, like Ken Ames in a recent issue of Museum News, assert that the message of mainstream academic history has been “characterized by intellectual narrowness, prejudice and a false hierarchy of significance. [It] glorifies and perpetuates the values and ideologies of the dominant groups in past and contemporary society.” Traditional textbook history, we have learned, excludes groups with alternative world views along with their stories.

The critics have had a transforming, corrective effect on the historical profession. Using the same exacting methodology as their predecessors, historians have exposed us to a symphony of new voices, subjects and interpretations. While exploding the canon to expose its cultural bias, they have nevertheless validated the underlying process of truth-finding. Tensions in the historical profession today just prove that the system is, to an extent, self-correcting. Museums have been vulnerable to the same attacks; because we institutionalize and operationalize academic conclusions the way amorphous academia never does, we are big-time targets. We have responded gamely with Excellence and Equity and the related changes already described.

But the most recent watchword in exhibit development has become “shared authority” — the concept of abandoning the museum professional’s stranglehold on exhibit content — and the godlike, omniscient curatorial voice that went with it — and instead creating a forum for the authentic voices and concerns of community members.

It sounds terrific as an abstract idea, but there is more than one fly in this wonderful ointment. The most troubling thing is the way we have focused on technique rather than content, on organizational change rather than intellectual change. We have seen the solution not in transforming our work, but in creating procedures to let others transform it for us. Embattled, gun-shy museum administrators avoid criticism by simply relinquishing control over exhibit content, by turning it over to advisory committees and community representatives. To avoid exercising an oppressive authority, they decide to exercise none at all. Museum staffs become mere facilitators, experts in the process of com-

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communication rather than the subject to be communicated. The finger can always be pointed elsewhere.

The community organization that wanted to leave its racial and labor problems out of the exhibit illustrates the problem I call “happy face” history. Go directly to people who define themselves as a group with a common story, and you will often get the Chamber of Commerce version of their past. Community groups see exhibits as opportunities to “generate pride” and “provide a forum” for their side of the story.

A related problem is what I call the mystery of the missing context. Members of the general public are seldom aware of the larger historical processes their history fits into, the parallels with other groups or the perspective of those with whom they have been in conflict. It’s hard for them to have any but an insider’s view of their own experiences or those of their peer group. That perspective is, of course, precisely why we go to them. But it’s not the whole story.

To have left out the perspective of the picketers would have falsified the past of that community organization, even though it was a past they didn’t want to acknowledge.

Then there is the problem of the wishy-washy labels that give so many perspectives you can make no sense out of them. Related to this is the “white noise” exhibit that contains only a cacophony of voices and no message. In this case, exhibit developers have retreated behind the safety of primary sources and failed to provide the context that can alone make sense of them.

The most troubling problem is the one I call the dilemma of dissolving truth. The question here is: What standards must our sources live up to? As we expand our investigations past the traditional written sources and begin to incorporate memory, tradition, myth and art as evidence of the past, we quickly run into the problem of how to define accuracy. This was the case with the Olmec head. To the education division, the fact that there were community members who sincerely believed that Africans had colonized the New World was sufficient to justify a label stating that fact. The curator demanded another standard.

Some museums are not just throwing out the old truths, but the very standards for reaching and communicating truth. If we discard professional criteria of evidence, of significance, of testing, then all truths become equal. Then to which of the many clamoring voices do we give credence? Do we present someone’s memory of what their grandmother told them on the same footing as a written record of the event? If a donor believes an artifact was an ethnic folk handicraft, does that have as much validity as the patent date stamped on the bottom? Do we offer our exhibit halls as forums for sincerely believed stories that community members read in the latest Michael Crichton book? Do we simply give over our exhibits to undigested source material, trusting visitors to sort through the conflicting voices?

If we indiscriminately throw open the exhibit planning process to the community, all of those things will happen. The line between sharing authority and abdicating professional responsibility is perilously thin. The point where you cross that line is when you say to your advisory committee not “Help us change our thinking,” but “Tell us what to say.”

It’s tempting to hand over control, because it gets us off the hook. It’s scary to have to interpret the data. It’s hard to draw conclusions. It’s doubly hard to leap out of one’s cultural groove. But the fact is we are paid to analyze and contextualize, to supply perspective and explanation, to represent the true complexity of the past. We are paid, like it or not, to exercise intellectual authority. If we abdicate that, we are faced with a Pandora’s box. Once the science museum discards the scientific method as
the criterion of truth, it can’t say no when the creationists come knocking on the door.

Once the history museum agrees to censor history to spare one group’s feelings, it can’t say no to the people who deny the Holocaust.

The answer is not in relaxing our scholarship, but in redoubling it — retaining our rigor while opening our minds.

Doing history right calls for unearthing the evidence, not for passing on unexamined conclusions. It means not less control of exhibit contents, but more — to present the true complexity of the past without descending into a meaningless blizzard of unstructured and uninterpreted facts. Above all, it means not telling lies.

It’s easy to lie in an exhibit. You lie every time you portray a group you are not part of without consulting them and giving them a voice. You lie every time you exclude evidence because it doesn’t support a predetermined conclusion. But there are other kinds of lies.

I lied when I did an entire exhibit about the fur trade without mentioning alcohol, because my Indian advisers told me it would be insensitive — this despite the fact the epidemic of alcoholism had as shattering an effect on Indian society as the smallpox. I lied when I organized an exhibit about the Hidatsa Indians without mentioning their religious beliefs, because I felt it would be too hot to handle. In the long run, I don’t think these lies did anyone any good. By relaxing my criteria of accuracy to avoid offense, I only gave ammunition to those who wanted to tell other sorts of lies, and I destroyed my authority to deny them.

If museums exercise a specious authority, our value to our communities will disintegrate. It will also disintegrate if we exercise no authority at all. It’s a hard row to hoe, but that’s the way it is.

Carolyn Gilman, a long-time Forum member, is now director of exhibits and design at the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. This paper was given at the 1994 annual meeting of the American Association for State and Local History.

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**Minnesota Historical Society Offers Research Grants**

The Minnesota Historical Society awards grants of up to $5,000 to support original research leading to interpretive publications on the history of Minnesota and the Upper Midwest.

Academics, independent scholars and professional and nonprofessional writers may apply. A strong preference is given to projects that will produce interpretive article- or book-length manuscripts to be considered for publication in *Minnesota History* or by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Especially encouraged are projects that add a multicultural dimension and that investigate subjects underrepresented in the published record — including agriculture, workers and work, historic preservation and sports. Projects focusing on the history of women are also of particular interest.

Grants are not awarded to support work on dissertations or theses or for the purchase of computers or other equipment. Grants are generally limited to expenses incurred in doing research — including, but not limited to, photocopies, supplies, travel, living expenses when conducting research away from home and oral history transcription. Independent scholars may consult the research supervisor about the possibility of including a stipend in the project budgets.

The deadlines are October 1, January 1 and March 1. For an application, write to Deborah L. Miller, Research Supervisor, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. West, St. Paul, MN 55102, or call Florence Regan at 612/297-2221.
1995 Independent Scholars Calendar

September 7, Thursday
2:00-4:00 p.m.
"Open House"
Elder Learning Institute
Coffman Union 4th Floor
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis
Contact: Steve Benson,
612/926-9386

September 16, Saturday
10:00 a.m.-noon
MISF Symposium Series on
America in the 20th Century
"A Century of Three
Revolutions? 1930s, 1960s,
1990s"
Minnesota History Center
St. Paul
Contact: MISF, 612/870-1859

September 30, Saturday
3:00-5:00 p.m.
"25th Anniversary Celebration"
for the Feminist Press
Frederick R. Weisman Museum
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis
Contact: Mary Treacy,
612/646-0475

October 13-15, Friday-Sunday
"The Victorian World and the
Master Detective: A Memorial
Conference with Dedication of
the John Bennett Shaw Library
of Sherlock Holmes"
Holiday Inn Metrodome,
Minneapolis
Contact: Austin McLean,
612/624-3855

October 28, Saturday
10:00 a.m.-noon.
MISF Symposium Series on
America in the 20th Century
"Who's an American? Struggles of Diversity
and Unity"
Minnesota History Center
St. Paul
Contact: MISF, 612/870-1859

November 11, Saturday
10:00 a.m.-noon
MISF Symposium Series on
America in the 20th Century
"Americans at Work"
Minnesota History Center,
St. Paul
Contact: MISF, 612/870-1859

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