



A Handbook for Academic Museums

Exhibitions and Education

Edited by Stefanie S. Jandl and Mark S. Gold

MuseumsEtc

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

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Academic Museums:
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Introduction

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College and university museums originated in the desire to teach with, and learn from, original objects. While the development and focus of individual museums may vary, academic museums share a unique mandate: they are partners in education. As such, college and university museums have evolved in tandem – not always easily – with their parent organizations to support the educational goals of the parent. These museums today are multi-faceted sites for object-based learning, research, professional training, and interdisciplinary collaboration, and they play a more vital role than ever in advancing the work of their parent institutions.

Within the community of museums, academic museums have their own sets of opportunities and challenges. Like their freestanding counterparts, academic museums collect, exhibit, interpret, and educate. But they can pursue these activities and express their missions in broader, more innovative ways. They can, for example, install exhibitions that explore controversial topics or artists under the umbrella of an educational institution. They can create small, focused shows with little pressure to produce blockbuster exhibitions. They can explore the teaching possibilities of a broad range of objects and exhibit those objects in new or unorthodox ways. They have a wealth of multi-disciplinary expertise within their campus community that can be tapped for research and interpretation. And they can be campus leaders in fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and forging new directions in education.

Academic museums may have a certain freedom to

experiment, but they must operate within a layered and sometimes challenging administrative structure. By definition college and university museums have parent organizations and function within a larger educational mission defined by the parent. In this two-tier environment, operations, strategic planning, governance, administration, financial support, and fundraising all become more complex. Some museums feel they compete as neglected stepchildren with other campus departments for operational support and the attention of the administration. Perhaps the greatest source of tension centers on the mission of the museum and how it relates to that of the college or university. In recent years, some parent organizations have even questioned the need for maintaining a campus museum, and some have attempted to monetize art collections to raise capital. These events have had a chilling effect on a community of museums that have not historically been called to defend their presence on campus and their contribution to the educational mission.

As editors, our goal was to aggregate, in one place, as much good, current thinking as we could on the opportunities and issues unique to academic museums. Soon after the Call for Papers was launched, however, it became clear that confining the publication to one volume would mean the elimination of many extremely valuable and thoughtful essays. With the enthusiastic approval of MuseumsEtc, we expanded the project to two companion volumes.

A Handbook for Academic Museums: Exhibitions and Education explores the robust body of exhibition practice in academic

museums and the ways in which academic museums play an essential role in the educational mission of their parent organizations. *A Handbook for Academic Museums: Beyond Exhibitions and Education* addresses most everything else, including the “macro” issues of mission, relationship to the parent organization, phases of birth and growth of academic museums, new technologies, and the collection as a fungible asset of the parent organization.

Another mid-course correction related to the way we considered innovative thinking and practice, especially for case studies. We are both most familiar with academic museums that are blessed with generous assets and support of the parent organization that provide a platform for exploring beyond traditional boundaries and taking greater risks. That being our bias, we initially embraced most strongly the proposals that involved cutting-edge initiatives. Thankfully, and as a result of the great variety of experiences offered by our authors, we quickly appreciated that academic museums are undertaking projects and creatively advancing themselves from a spectrum of base points and with an equally diverse range of resources to support those efforts. We therefore sought to provide a collection of essays that offer best practices, innovations, and good thinking that will offer guidance and inspiration for the entire community.

In selecting our topics, we endeavored to include subject matter which would have both current and long-term applicability and sustained relevance. Other than technology, which is in a perpetual state of change, the only exception

is the immediate issue relating to the monetization of the collection – an emotionally-charged issue of recent urgency. In addressing this sensitive subject, our philosophy was not to be a forum for a debate on the merits of monetization, nor to applaud or condemn decisions or conduct in any one particular instance. Rather, we have chosen to offer information on the legal underpinnings of these issues, to provide the academic museum community with a rare look inside the processes and thinking at the presidential and trustee level as these decisions are made, and to consider how institutional history, culture, and structure can contribute to those decisions.

What is not in these volumes are essays about museums in general that may have applicability to academic museums. The essays in these two volumes are written about, by, and for the community of academic museums. They are intended to be a practical resource for that community. Authors were charged with providing useful information in their essays, such as strategies, best practices, mistakes made, lessons learned, what worked, what didn't, and why. While we sought out subjects that would be relevant to readers, it was also imperative that they be helpful. The books offer a depth of combined wisdom of the profession for the benefit of its practitioners.

Finally, we viewed our role to be editors of the volumes, and not necessarily editors of each essay. We afforded our authors great latitude so that their stories and their thoughts could be in their own voice. As a result, there may be a lack of uniformity of voice amongst the essays, but we felt that the benefits of authenticity and integrity of authorship were paramount.

The essays in these companion volumes were selected to help readers think about their own institutions, programs, challenges, and opportunities – informed and expanded upon by perspectives on what others have done in similar situations and what might be possible. They were intended to stimulate further thinking and discussion among academic museum professionals and within academic museums. We hope the essays contribute to an enhanced practice within the academic museum community and a deepened engagement with its core work: cultivating learning opportunities through original objects.

We offer our sincere thanks to the authors who have so generously contributed their time, expertise, and voice in that effort; these volumes would not have been possible without them.

Stefanie Jandl and Mark Gold

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