



FOUNDATIONS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

EVOLVING SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE

Kiersten F. Latham and
John E. Simmons

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

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KIERSTEN F. LATHAM
and JOHN E. SIMMONS



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Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Latham, Kiersten Foursh.

Foundations of museum studies : evolving systems of knowledge / Kiersten F.

Latham and John E. Simmons.

pages cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61069-282-3 (pbk : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-61069-952-5 (ebook)

1. Museums. 2. Museum techniques. 3. Museums—United States. 4. Museum techniques—United States. I. Simmons, John E. II. Title.

AM5. L38 2014

069—dc23 2014016908

ISBN 978-1-61069-282-3

EISBN: 978-1-61069-952-5

18 17 16 15 14 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.

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130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

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We dedicate this book to the memory of our former museum studies professor and advisor, scientist, curator, and museum director, Philip Strong Humphrey (1926–2009), who conveyed his passion and vision of museums to several generations of grateful students and colleagues.

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Foreword

Since the expansion of academic programs began in the 1970s, museum studies has become a rapidly evolving field. Prospective museum studies students are now faced with a bewilderingly diverse array of master's degree and graduate certificate programs, both residential and online.

While debates continue about what should be taught in museum studies programs, one thing remains certain: students will always need access to new and different approaches to museum studies, especially when that information is provided by highly respected museum professionals, with decades of experience in both the academic and day-to-day aspects of museum practice.

Kiersten Latham and John Simmons are uniquely qualified to write a museum studies textbook that offers a broad, holistic introduction to the field in an international context, interweaving museological theory and museum practice to show how each informs the other, to help museums change and grow to better serve their audiences. The concepts and ideas presented in this book have been selected and developed by the authors based on their experiences working in museums, and honed by their years of teaching museum studies to graduate students. Museum studies is presented from an information and library science perspective, using a systems approach to analyze museums as dynamic organizations. The result is an understanding of museums as evolving institutions embedded in a larger cultural complex that includes libraries, archives, and other information entities, emphasizing the importance of the object-based learning that takes place in museums.

Museums today fill many roles in societies around the world—as educational institutions, as research institutions, as economic engines for communities, as preservers of the world's great heritages, and as trusted conveners. If museums are to continue to help us understand the past and navigate our future—as individuals, as societies, and as a global community—then future museum professionals must understand the historical development of museums, the work of museums in a global context, the broad skill set required for a successful museum career, and the interaction of museums and museum professionals across the spectrum of academic disciplines. *Foundations of Museum Studies: Evolving Systems of Knowledge* provides an important introduction to museum studies and a solid foundation on which students can build their careers in the museum field.

Ford W. Bell, DVM
President
American Alliance of Museums
Washington, DC

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Preface

Why This Book?

This book has evolved—like museums—for several reasons. First, we saw the need for a concise introduction to museums and museum studies. It has been many years since the *Manual for Museums* by Ralph H. Lewis (1976) and *Introduction to Museum Work* by G. Ellis Burcaw (first edition 1975, third edition 1997) were written. Although there have been other good books since those volumes appeared—most notably *Museums in Motion* by Mary Alexander and Edward P. Alexander (first edition 1979, second edition 2007)—none have filled the role of providing an integrated practice-and-theory-based, holistic introduction to museums and their study. A second impetus for writing this book was that one of us (KFL) developed an entirely new specialization in museum studies within the master of library and information science (MLIS) program at Kent State University in 2010–2011. This book is modeled on the introductory course Foundations of Museum Studies, which is the prerequisite for all other museum studies courses in the program. The third reason is that because library and information science (LIS) schools are beginning to incorporate the study of museums into their curricula, there is an increasing need to understand museums from this perspective (and vice versa). Finally, as graduates of museum studies programs ourselves, we wanted to write the sort of book that we wish had been available when we were graduate students.

What Is the Purpose of This Book?

This volume is meant to be the central text for an introductory graduate course on museum studies. It is our intention that it will give readers a broad overview of museums, from their early history to the present (and with speculation on their future); explain how museums function; and provide a good understanding of the theoretical bases of museum studies. It is meant to be an introduction that lends itself well to supplementary readings assigned by the instructor to delve more deeply into the many complex crevices of museum studies.

How Is This Book Different?

Although it was written from within an LIS school, the perspective and framework found in this book are broad enough that all institutions

of learning that teach introductory museum studies can use it. One of the unique things about the book is that we take a systems perspective on museums and consider them document-centered institutions. In doing this, we have brought both museums and museum studies together and have examined museum practice through the interdisciplinary lenses of theory. We see museums as part of the spectrum of educational, informational, and recreational institutions that includes libraries, archives, special collections, and others and feel that they deserve inclusion as such. In addition, although our perspective on museums is global (between us we have worked with museums in countries around the globe), we know museums in the United States best; therefore many of our examples are from U.S. institutions. What this book is not is a detailed manual on how to run a museum—information on the step-by-step details of museum practice is available elsewhere.

How to Use This Book

This book is arranged in the order of subject matter that we follow in the Foundations of Museum Studies course at Kent State University, which is organized around the simple questions how, what, who, where, and why. The order and content has evolved over several years of teaching and practice into what we believe is the best approach for an introduction to the subject. We have supplemented the text with photographs and figures to provide further understanding. In addition, sprinkled throughout the text are a series of “Reality Checks” that provide our personal perspectives on the intersection of theory and practice in museums.

Although we have kept the number of references minimal, we encourage instructors and students to supplement the text with other readings, particularly those that focus more specifically on current and trending issues, because museum studies is a rapidly evolving field. The growth of the museum studies literature since the 1970s has been tremendous, and anyone interested in a career in museum work will profit from reading widely and copiously.

What Is in This Book?

Our book begins with a critical examination of the many definitions of museums and our proposal of a definition that we believe works best, followed by a review of the history of museums and how they have evolved and changed over the centuries. In Section Two (How) we examine museums as systems and how the museum system is situated within other, larger systems. Although many museum studies textbooks have treated museums as if they were independent, stand-alone institutions, we want readers to see museums as integral parts of the societies in which they function. The next chapter in this section presents an overview of the essential functions of museums: preservation of collections, research, and communication. The two chapters in Section Three (What) address critical issues found in the many kinds of museums that exist today, the commonalities they share, the differences that distinguish them, and what we call the *meaningful physical resource*—the objects in museums. Most museum studies texts treat objects as merely things that make up the collections, focusing on the prescriptive aspects of how objects are managed in collections. However, we consider both the physicality and the meaning of objects, particularly how these meanings

evolve when objects become musealized. This section includes the heart of our book, an examination of the critical shift in museology from a primary focus on museum visitors to a primary focus on the relationship between people and objects, and in that context, how objects are used and perceived, what they signify, and how they act as documents. Section Four (Who) looks at the human aspects of museums, both the museum workers (in Chapter 7) and the museum users (Chapter 8). Section Five (Where) reviews the evolving concept of museums as they have sprouted up all over the world. The last portion of the book, Section Six (Why), gives readers a glimpse of what lies ahead for them in their careers and a place to think intentionally about their own role in shaping the future of museums.

Who Are We?

Kiersten F. Latham earned a BA in anthropology, an MA in historical administration and museum studies, and a PhD in library and information management. During her professional career, she has held a variety of museum positions that have brought her in close contact with a myriad of museum types and sizes, including director of a local historical society, curator of collections and research at a city museum, curator of collections at a space history museum, program coordinator at a science center, costumed interpreter at a living history museum, and acting director of the University of Kansas Museum Studies Program. Latham has also served as an adjunct faculty member for Bethany College, University of Kansas, Northern States Conservation Center, Michigan State University, and Bowling Green State University. In 2010 she accepted a position at Kent State University as assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), where she designed, developed, and implemented a museum studies specialization situated within an information perspective. Latham conducts research and has published extensively in the areas of museology, document studies, lived experience, materiality, and phenomenological research methods. Her publications include *The Invisibility of Collections Care Work* (2007), *Archives and Experience: Musings on Meaning* (2007), *The Poetry of the Museum: A Holistic Model of Numinous Museum Experiences* (2007), *Museum Object as Document: Using Buckland's Information Concepts to Understand Museum Experiences* (2012), *The Thickness of the Things: Exploring the Museum Curriculum through Phenomenological Touch* (2011, with E. Wood), and *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums* (2013, with E. Wood), among others.

John E. Simmons has a BS in systematics and ecology and an MA in historical administration and museum studies. He began his career as a zookeeper, then worked as collections manager at the California Academy of Sciences and the Biodiversity Research Center and Natural History Museum of the University of Kansas, where he also served as director of the Museum Studies Program. Currently he teaches museum studies as an adjunct faculty member at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Juniata College, Kent State University, and the Northern States Conservation Center; serves as adjunct curator of collections at the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum & Art Gallery at Penn State University; and runs Museologica, an international museum consulting company. Simmons received the Superior Voluntary Service Award from AAM (2001), the Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Mentoring of Graduate Students from the University of Kansas (2005), and the Carolyn L. Rose Award for Outstanding Commitment

to Natural History Collections Care and Management from the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (2011). Among his publications are *Herpetological Collecting and Collections Management* (2002), *Cuidado, Manejo y Conservación de las Colecciones Biológicas* (2005, with Yaneth Muñoz-Saba), *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies* (2006), *History of Museums* (2010), *Observation and Distillation—Perception, Depiction, and the Perception of Nature* (2012, with Julianne Snider), and *Application of Preventive Conservation to Solve the Coming Crisis in Collections Management* (2013).

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Acknowledgments

A great deal of work goes into the making of a textbook. Many people have been involved along the way, and to all of them, we are grateful.

First, we thank our publisher, ABC-CLIO, for recognizing the need for this textbook and giving us the freedom to develop this book amid our often busy and conflicting schedules.

We greatly appreciate Cori Iannaggi, Randy Brown, Emily Wicks, Elee Wood, Teresa Goforth, and Brad Taylor, Blanche Woolls, and an anonymous reviewer for their critical comments and helpful suggestions on the manuscript. Thanks also to John Gouin (Graphikitchen) for his creative graphic interpretations, and to Julianne Snider for her assistance in selecting and formatting the photographs.

K. F. Latham: I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at Kent State School of Library and Information Science for patiently listening to me talk about this book for two years and to my students—from Kent State and before—who helped form the structure and form of the book through their feedback and questions along the way. Thanks are also due to John Agada, Greg Byerly, and Carolyn Brodie for having the vision to include museum studies in the field of library and information science and having the faith in me to make a difference. Special gratitude goes out to many colleagues who, during more than twenty years of working in various museums, taught me how to understand how museums work and what they are all about. This book would not have been possible without the existence of my wonderful co-author, John Simmons, who has been my teacher, mentor, and colleague for almost as long as I've been in the museum field. Most of all, I want to thank my dear husband, Mark, and sweet child, Callan, for listening to Mama go on endlessly about museum studies even though they might rather have talked about archaeology, basketball, *Doctor Who*, or *Sherlock*.

J. E. Simmons: I thank Julianne Snider for her suggestions, assistance, and patience during the writing of this book; I could not have done my part without her steadfast help and support. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Kiersten F. Latham for recruiting me to teach museum studies at Kent State, for introducing me to the ideas of Ivo Maroević, and most of all for inviting me to participate in the writing of this book. Teaching is something I never intended to take on, but I am very grateful for the opportunities I have had to convey my fascination with museums to students. Nearly forty years of working in museums and in the classroom (both analog and virtual) has proved over and over again that one always learns more from teaching than from being a student.

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