

History 435
Museums: A Social, Political, and Institutional History
Tuesdays, 1:00-2:50, King 339
Fall 2021

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Office Hours, Rice 314:
Tuesdays, 3:00pm-4:30pm
Friday, 10:30am-12pm

From the first natural history and art museums to the new 21st century “memorial museums,” museums have long claimed to play important social functions, from educating a responsible citizenry to transforming visitors through their exhibits and educational programs. This seminar explores the origins, evolution, and function of different types of museums from the 18th to the 21st century.

We will explore the relationship between museums and modernity, the ways in which museums construct knowledge and narratives, and how museum practices have changed over time. Our class will consider a range of fundamental questions about museums. What exactly is a museum and what distinguishes it from other institutions? When and why did museums first develop? In what ways have museums been colonial institutions and can they be decolonized? How have museums served to legitimize the nation and how have movements to build alternative museums sought to challenge dominant cultural and political narratives? Through readings and museum visits, we will consider the many ways in which museums produce and structure knowledge.

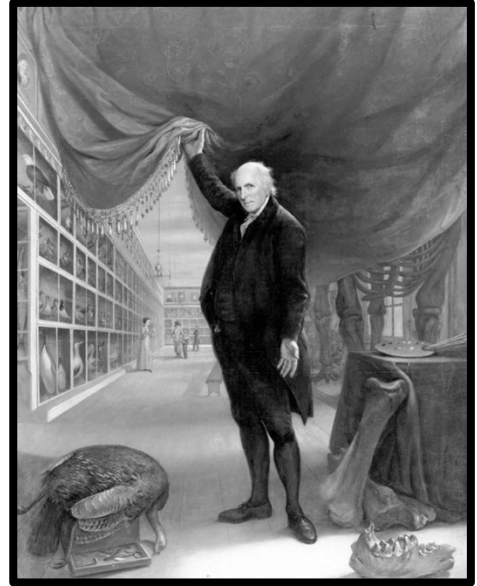


Figure 1: Charles Willson Peale, "The Artist in His Museum (1822)

This class requires two Saturday field trips and at least one additional museum visit on your own. On Saturday, October 30, we will visit the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. On Saturday, December 4, we will visit the Great Lakes Science Center and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. On both days, we will leave campus around 9am and return by 4pm. All costs of travel and museum visits are covered, but please bring money to purchase lunch. In addition, each student will be expected to visit the Allen Art Museum on their own before our class meeting on October 12.

*Please note: I have chosen to have the class meet virtually for the two sessions after the holiday break since some students may not be planning on spending Winter Term on campus. If, however, the class expresses a near unanimous preference to meet in person, I am happy to switch to in-person meetings for those last sessions. The link for our virtual meetings is <https://oberlin.zoom.us/j/89008430607>.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is designed for advanced undergraduate students in History and related fields who are interested in learning about museums, their social and political functions, and the evolution of museum practices. Students who complete the class will leave with a sophisticated understanding of,

and appreciation for, the history and evolution of museums as political and social institutions, and for the functions that they have played in different eras. This class also aims to help students develop a set of tools that can be used anywhere to better understand the narratives, design, and functions of any museum you might visit over the course of your life. Whether you plan to work in museums or not, after taking this class you should always find something to analyze in any museum you visit. Students in this class will also hone their skills in observation and analysis; become more proficient in reading secondary sources efficiently for argument, content, and use of evidence; and improve their written and oral communication skills through writing exercises and engaged discussions. Finally, the course aims to increase students' comfort with sharing their own work and engaging in constructive collaborative discussion, skills that are vital for anyone considering working in a museum setting.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The following books are available at the college bookstore and are on reserve at Mudd:

Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013)

Dan Hicks, *The British Museum: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (Pluto Press, 2020)

Stephen Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Harvard University Press, 2017)

All other readings are available on a shared Google Drive and are available as links through the online syllabus at <https://sites.google.com/oberlin.edu/museums-a-history/home>. Please bookmark the online syllabus for reference throughout the class.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Your grade in History 435 will be based on the following:

- **Leading the Class and Reading Papers (15% each, 30% of final grade total)**
Twice during the semester—once before Thanksgiving and once after Thanksgiving—you and two other students will be in charge of a leading the class discussion. Student facilitators will meet with me in advance of their session to talk through the readings and their plans for the class session. Each discussion facilitator is required to write a 3-4 page paper (approximately 1000 words) that explores an analytic or historiographical issue raised in one or more of the readings. Facilitators should coordinate among themselves how they want to select among the readings or topics for a particular class session. Together, they will also develop and post questions that they think will best generate class discussion. Papers and discussion questions must be posted to the course blackboard site by **6pm on Mondays**.

In class, we will discuss the reading and the student papers; facilitators should help organize and stimulate the discussion. Facilitators should think creatively about how best to generate deep analysis and discussion of the course material; they should not plan on giving formal presentations on their papers or the readings. Each session you help facilitate will count as 15% of your grade. There will be no student facilitators (or required blackboard postings) for the two classes when museum critiques are due (November 2 and December 7).

- **Weekly Blackboard Posting (10% final grade):**
Students must post a weekly response of one or two robust paragraphs to at least one of the

discussion questions posed by the student discussion facilitators. Questions will be posted by the facilitators by 6pm on Monday. By noon on Tuesday, every student who is not facilitating read the papers of the class facilitators and should post a response to the blackboard site. These postings will not be individually graded, but I will offer you some feedback on your postings twice during the semester. Taken together, postings will count as 15% of your grade.

- **Three Museum Critiques (10% each of final grade, 30% total)**

Each student will write three museum critiques of 1200-1500 words over the course of the semester. In these critiques, you will be practicing the observation and analytical skills modeled by Margaret Lindauer in her article, “The Critical Museum Visitor” (which we are reading for our first class session).

You must write one review (of either the Cleveland Art Museum or the Cleveland Museum of Natural History) for our class on November 2. Students may not submit reviews of two museums at the same class session. You must write a second review (of either the Great Lakes Science Center or the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame) for our class on December 7. Again you cannot write reviews of both of those museums for the same class session. Your third museum critique may be written about any other museum you visit on your own over the course of the semester, including the Allen Art Museum, or a museum that you visit during your Thanksgiving or holiday breaks. Critiques should be based on in-person visits.

Museum critiques written for the November 2 and December 7 session will be due at the start of our class session. Those critiques should draw on appropriate assigned readings for that day to help you better understand and contextualize the kind of museum you are critiquing. Your third critique can be turned in at any time over the course of the semester as long as it is in by 5:00pm on the last day of classes for the semester (Friday, January 14). Turn in all critiques by uploading them to the course blackboard site. More detailed guidelines for the museum critique are available on the course webpage.

- **Final Project (30% of total grade)**

As a final project for History 435, you (either individually or preferably, as part of a group of two) will design a gallery or an exhibit for a museum. The goal of this assignment is for you to bring together ideas and evidence from the course readings to propose a gallery or exhibit that 1) is attentive to the ways in which museums relate to objects, construct narratives, and serve communities; and that 2) addresses concerns about museum practices that have been labeled exclusionary or colonialist. You will need to propose and defend your choice; explain its importance and its theme/arguments, describe specific components of the exhibit/gallery, and theorize your work based on course readings. A short initial proposal of your topic will be due by 5:00pm on Friday, November 19. A bibliography and list of resources you are finding most helpful in theorizing your exhibit will be due Friday, December 17 by 5:00pm. The project itself will be due at the time of our regularly scheduled final exam, on Thursday, January 20th at 9:00am. Students will give short presentations to the class about their projects during our scheduled exam time (9am-11am). Further guidelines about the final project are available on the class website.

A note on participation and attendance

I will not be formally giving you a participation grade, although I will take into account absences without good explanations and an unwillingness to engage in the class when I calculate your final grade. My expectation is that everyone is here to learn and to contribute to our learning

community. The only way to do that is by coming to class having done the reading and prepared to share your ideas with your peers. Student participation is absolutely vital to the success of the class and being comfortable sharing your ideas orally is an important life skill. If you are anxious about speaking in class, please come to see me at the beginning of the semester to talk about strategies for becoming a more active participant.

COURSE POLICIES:

Classroom Environment: Talking about museums should and will be fun talking, but we will also be discussing issues that can be challenging, such as colonialism, racism, and violence. All of us share a responsibility to make this an enriching and safe space for making arguments, expressing our views, disagreeing with others' ideas, and raising questions. "Safe" is not the same as comfortable; there may be moments of discomfort in discussion, but we all need to bring patience and respect into the classroom. Respecting our class space also means coming to class on time and being attentive while in class.

Oberlin Honor Code: All work for this course must be done in compliance with the Oberlin Honor Code, which means that it must be your own. Plagiarism is presenting the work of another as your own; it is a form of stealing. You must acknowledge when you use the ideas of other people (whether that be other students or published materials from websites, books, the media, etc.). If you have questions about citations, academic honesty, or the acceptability of collaborations, please see me. You should include the honor code ("I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment") on all the written work you hand in for this class.

Educational Access: I am committed to creating inclusive learning environments and to designing a course in which all students can learn. If any aspects of the instruction or design of the course result in dis/ability-related barriers to your participation, please let me know. If you receive any specific accommodations, please provide documentation from the Disability Service Office.

Extra Help: I am happy to meet students any time, whether you are seeking guidance on assignments or you want to discuss the reading or other topics of interest to you. Please come to office hours or make an appointment to see me at another time as often as you like. If you need to contact me, the best way to reach me is via email. I will always respond within 24 hours, if not sooner.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

October 5: Introduction—What is a Museum? (43 pages)

Kenneth Hudson, "Attempts to Define 'Museum,'" in David Boswell and Jessica Evans, ed., Representing the Nation: A Reader (Routledge, 1999), 371-379.

Steven Lubar, "Introduction" from Inside the Lost Museum, 1-10.

Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor" in Janet Marstine, ed., New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction (Blackwell, 2008), 203-225

"What is the Single Most Important Function of Museums, *Youtube*

"Pinky Show: We Love Museums—Do Museums Love Us Back?,"
<https://vimeo.com/39864880>

On your own: Individual Visit to the Allen Art Museum

Sometime before our class on October 12, please visit the Allen Art Museum and try looking at it through the lens of the Lindauer article and the guide to writing museum critiques that is on our course website. You may choose to write your first museum critique of the Allen, although you are not required to do so. We will spend a portion of class time on October 12 talking through your visits to the Allen.

October 12: A Pre-History of Museums (~90 pages)

John Simmons, Museums: A History, Chapters 2-4, pp. 29-92.

Bert van de Roemer, "Redressing the Balance: Levinus Vincent's Wonder Theater of Nature," *Public Domain Review*, August 20, 2014.

Christina Kreps, "Non-Western Models of Museums and Curation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in Sharon Macdonald, ed., A Companion to Museum Studies, 457-472.

October 19: Birth of the Modern Museum (89 pages)

Tony Bennett, "The Formation of the Museum" in The Birth of the Museum (Routledge, 1995), 17-58.

Jeffery Abt, "The Origins of the Public Museum" in A Companion to Museum Studies, 115-134.

Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum" in Bettina Carbonell, ed, Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2012), 46-59.

Miriam Levin, "Museums and the Democratic Order," *Wilson Quarterly* 26:1 (Winter 2002): 52-65.

October 27: Museums and Collecting (95 pages)

Steven Lubar, "Part I: Collect" in The Lost Museums, 11-92.

Stephen Weil, "Collecting Then, Collecting Today: What's the Difference?" in Reinventing the Museum, 284-291.

Bob Beatty, "The Deaccessioning Debate in Museums," *Hyperallergic*, August 2, 2018.

Class Guest: Andria Derstine, Director of the Allen Art Museum

October 30: First Field Trip—Visit Cleveland Museum of Art and Cleveland Museum of Natural History (leave campus 9:00am, return by 4:00pm)

November 2: Art Museums and Natural History Museums/Museum Critique Due (50 pages)

“Art and Design Museums” in Museums in Motion, 35-54.

“Natural History and Anthropology Museums” in Museums in Motion, 59-85.

Christopher Kemp, “Museums: The Endangered Dead,” *Nature*, January 19, 2015, pp. 92-94.

November 9: Museums as Political Spaces (71 pages)

Tony Bennett, “The Political Rationality of the Museum,” in The Birth of the Museum, 89-108.

Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship” in Exhibiting Cultures, 88-103.
Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, “Making and Remaking National Identities,” in A Companion to Museum Studies, 152-169.

Steven Dubin, “Incivilities in Civil(-ized) Places: ‘Culture Wars’ in Comparative Perspective,” in A Companion to Museum Studies, 477-493.

November 16: Community Museums/Museums and Identity (199 pages)

Steven Lubar, Chapter 16, “Museums Make Communities” in Inside the Lost Museum, 254-264.

Andrea A. Burns, From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), entire.

November 19: Final Project Proposal Due (upload to blackboard by 5:00pm)

THANKSGIVING BREAK

November 30: Objects and Authenticity in the Museum (83 pages)

Stephen Lubar, “The Ethics of Objects” in The Lost Museum, 128-146.

Elaine Heumann Gurian, “What is the Object of This Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums” in Reinventing the Museum, 269-283.

Paul Williams, “The Surviving Object: Presence and Absence in Memorial Museums” in Memorial Museums, 25-50.

Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue,” in Reinventing the Museum, 159-175.

Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, “Museums and Authenticity,” *Museum News*, May/June 2007, pp. 76-80, 92-93.

December 4: Visit Great Lakes Science Center and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (leave campus 9:00am, return by 4:00pm)

December 7: Science and History Museums/Museum Critique Due (65 pages)

“Science Museums” in Edward and Mary Alexander, Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions. Of Museums, 2nd ed. (Altamira Press, 2008), 91-110.

“History Museums” in Museums in Motion, 111-140.

Steven Conn, “Science Museums and the Culture Wars,” in A Companion to Museum Studies, 494-508.

December 14: Display and the Construction of Museum Narratives (175 pages)

Stephen Lubar, “Part III: Display” in The Lost Museum, 149-226.

Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present” in Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, ed., History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment, 1-37.

Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History,” *Curator* (1993), 302-313.

Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger Jr., Righting America at the Creation Museum, Chapter 1, pp. 16-63.

December 17: Final Project Bibliography and Resource Guide Due (Upload to Blackboard by 5:00pm)

December 21: Decolonizing the Museum (~264 pages)

Dan Hicks, The Brutish Museum (entire, but focus on preface-Chapter 5, Chapter 9-Afterword).

Karen J. Warren, “A Philosophical Perspective on the Ethics and Resolution of Cultural Properties Issues” in Reinventing the Museum, 303-324.

January 4: Museums and Social Justice (~100 pages)

Richard Sandell, “Museums and the Combating of Social Inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance,” in Richard Sandell, ed., Museums, Society, Inequality (2002), 3-23.

Amy Sodaro, Introduction, Chapters 1&2 in Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 1-57

Sarah Pharaon, Sally Roesch Wagner, Barbara Lau, and Maria Jose Balano Caballero, “Safe Containers for Dangerous Memories,” *The Public Historian* 37: 2 (May 2015): 61–72.

Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, "Bringing Self-Examination to the Center of Social Justice Work in Museums," *Museum Magazine*, January/February 2016, pp. 40-45.

Joanne Jones-Rizzi and Stacy Mann, "Is that Hung White?," *Museum Magazine*, July 1, 2020.

Class Guest: Braden Paynter '05, Director of Methodology and Practice at the International Sites of Conscience

January 11: The Future of Museums (~53 pages)

Charles Saumarez Smith, "The Future of the Museum" in [A Companion to Museum Studies](#), 543-554.

Robinson Meyer, "The Museum of the Future is Here," *The Atlantic Online*, January 20, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/01/how-to-build-the-museum-of-the-future/384646/>

Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums What's Plan B?," *The Public Historian* 30:4 (Fall 2008): 9-27.

Andras Zanto, "What is the Future of Museums," *Art World*, January 1, 2021.

Thursday, January 20, 9:00am: Final project due; student presentations on final projects during our regularly scheduled final exam slot (9am-11am).