

Feminism in the Museum

Introduction

In our recent reading of *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*¹, I enjoyed some articles more than others. Having a special interest in feminism and women's history, Barbara Melosh's article, "Speaking of Women: Museums' Representations of Women's History,"² struck a particular chord. Although I felt she tried to address too many issues, this article did have some merit.

Museums' Role in Society

Melosh presents in this article some well-defined ideas as to what exactly the museum's purpose is in the big picture. Her viewpoint is not original, but she delineates it very articulately. Melosh's museum not only displays trends in history, but can set them—or at least be a part of currently occurring ones. Museum exhibits are "at once vehicle and agent of social change,"³ and museums have a role in "a process of incorporation and accommodation that constantly renews and fortifies dominant ideology."⁴ This is a far cry from early museums whose mission seemed mainly to house and exhibit artifacts. Such early museums were reactive, even passive. Melosh's museum acts on the world as well as reacting to it; it actively reaches out and teaches its visitor rather than passively letting the visitor leave the exhibit carrying only the same information with which he or she came.

One reason Melosh is so passionate about this duty of the present-day museum is her awareness of the museum's educational potential for reaching a larger audience than would be reached through schools alone, or even through schools, public television, and libraries.⁵ Some might say this relegates to the museum the job of educating the masses, while schools "take care of the important stuff." Melosh, however, does not see this duty as emphasizing any kind of chasm between the academic scholar and "the public," the visitor, the uneducated masses. She rejects

¹ Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

² Pages 183-214.

³ Page 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Page 184.

any philosophy of education which seeks to eliminate from its focus the person without an affinity for books and school-based education, and sees a unified teamwork approach between all cultural institutions, including schools and museums, as a crucial factor in education and social change. She believes that anyone should be able to walk into a good museum exhibit and learn a great deal; furthermore, it is the duty of the museum staff to ensure that the exhibit provides this to all of its visitors, if not to an even wider audience (such as through secondary promotional pieces like posters and photographs). Providing such an experience to an audience of generalists need not make history dull, nor flat, and especially not oversimplified; the exhibit should develop a “creative synthesis...that distills without diluting historical interpretation.”⁶

Museums and Social Change

Melosh views museums as the perfect agent for changing the way society, including and perhaps especially academia, views history. Museums, she says,

*have a special responsibility to close the gap between scholarly and popular conceptions of the past, to convey a more complex sense of history as a flexible and time-bound medium, explicitly interpretive and partial in its constructions of the past.*⁷

Museums have a “sanctifying voice” through which they wield a powerful influence on visitors’ views of the content, as well as the method, of what they see.⁸

One important change is to make history relevant to the visitors’ lives, to bring them into it by giving them a way to relate it to their own experiences. The first way to do this is to emphasize the “significance of ordinary lives”:⁹

*In this ambitious new agenda, history ‘from the bottom up’ not only would add ordinary lives to the record but would challenge the periodization and interpretive paradigms based solely on a history of politics and great men.*¹⁰

Great Man History

“Great man” history is the kind of history most adults entering the museum field now experienced in their childhood educations. It is the study of accomplished men, such as inventors, presidents, kings, and recognized authors. This type of history can alienate students, as it presents a very narrow view of history. It eliminates the ordinary people who lived in a given historical era and focuses only on a small

⁶ Page 185.

⁷ Page 209.

⁸ Page 183.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Pages 183-84.

section of society. Is our current president representative of all Americans, or even most Americans? Statistically speaking, he is representative of a small but politically active section of American life. There are worlds between him and many of the people of his nation, subcultures of different races and nationalities, different experiences and needs. Therefore, would it make sense for an historian 100 years from now to study our president and infer from that anything about life as it was in America? In order to get even at the beginnings of a full picture of real life in America, one must consider at least the material culture and the oral histories of the people who lived it.

“Great man” history ignores this entire issue; it is a non-issue for the creator and the viewer of “great man” history. Fortunately, the prevailing viewpoint in current scholarship seems to be getting away from that and beginning to emphasize material culture and other more filled-out pictures of history. But Melosh takes this popular opinion another step. She wants museums, and their visitors, to reconstruct the way in which we make this change, notably in terms of our approaches to women’s history.

Compensatory History

Melosh calls upon historian Gerda Lerner’s term “compensatory history,” which she defines as

*a revision of the record that adds women without fundamentally reordering the categories or questions of historical analysis.*¹¹

¹¹ Page 187.

Compensatory history is basically including women in an exhibit, but not in any intrinsically female way; it is inviting them to participate in an essentially male game. An example would be a Black History Month exhibit that includes photographs of Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Alice Walker. But it can apply to all-female exhibits as well, such as the National Women's Hall of Fame, located at the Sewall-Be Belmont House, in which "great man" history is simply transmogrified into "great woman" history.

This is at least a step in the right direction, as it "challenges the selectivity and male bias of traditional historical accounts, and its record of women's achievements celebrates female agency."¹² Compensatory history has had the advantage in the short term of being intellectually accessible to those unaccustomed to thinking of women in achieving roles. Compensatory history "uses already recognized markers of achievement to guide its audience through the less-familiar territory of women's lives."¹³ But compensatory history as presented in such exhibits as those at the National Women's Hall of Fame are not representative of all women, or even of most women.¹⁴

The point has been raised that "great woman" history is still important, because there are women who have been first in their fields who need to be recognized as such. This is, of course, true, as recognition of men who accomplished great things throughout history must not be ignored. However, this treatment of history has been too long accepted as complete, and Melosh calls for a change.

It is time, Melosh feels, to progress into new realms of presenting women's history. She urges historians, both in academia and in museums (and anywhere else) to "ask not how women fit into history but rather how the discipline of history must be reimagined to take account of female experience."¹⁵ Material culture, looking at the kinds of clothing women were wearing and the kinds of medical care available to them, for instance, is one way to get a multi-dimensional image of women's history. Melosh touches on, but does not elaborate deeply enough, ways in which material culture should be used to instill women's history with a true femaleness, and not just fitting women's history into a men's history mold.

Civility and Conflict

Civility is a term Melosh uses to refer to attitudes and behaviors that she implies are akin to pandering to one's patrons and corporate sponsors. She oozes distaste with the unwillingness of museums to take a stand on a controversial social issue, such as

¹² Page 187.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ I am not certain that it is possible to create an exhibit that encompasses all kinds of women or even a majority of women.

¹⁵ Page 186.

sexuality, especially homosexuality. Melosh criticizes museums harshly for their buying into social civility, stating that this is the baffler holding museums back from doing fully realized women's history. She says that museum administrators are too concerned with suppressing conflict and therefore they limit their own discourse.¹⁶ But it must be acknowledged that many of her suggested contents and methodologies would be difficult to present to a "diverse and amorphous public,"¹⁷ as museum administrators really are not in the business of offending their public, nor do they want to be labeled as belonging to any particular sector of society. Objectivity, to the extent to which it can be attained, seems to be a major goal of many museums for this reason. She seems to feel that individuals speaking out through exhibits might be more daring, and faults museums for neglecting to put individual credits on exhibits, stating who the authors are of the label copy, of the design of the exhibit, and of the original idea, though this could be due to history's tradition of being purely facts—dates and names—while the new social history, or her fully realized women's history, leaves much more gray area, especially when it comes to recent history.

Conclusion

Melosh has some admirable sentiments for changing social ideologies into more progressive and inclusive ways of thinking. However, she tends to pick a lot, and many of her demands seem a bit unreasonable, or like too much personal preference. I also think she harps too much on the homosexuality issue, and on sexuality in general: I am no prude, but why is it so all-important to include explicit sexual material into museum exhibits? I would not be against it if it were done, but I certainly do not see it as a societal flaw that it is not done more.

I also found myself frustrated with Melosh's abrupt shifts between broad, abstract theory and minute details about specific exhibits. It also frustrates me as a former student of social research methods to realize how incredibly self-selected and slanted "studies" like hers can be. And my frustration was compounded by the fact that virtually none of the exhibits about which she writes are available to me to critique first-hand; I simply have to take her word for it and see it only through her eyes.

¹⁶ Page 207.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*