

Libraries, Museums, and the Convergence of Historic Rivals

Libraries and museums (LAM) in the United States are in a state of change based on Congress' politicization of libraries and museums, budget cuts stemming from the Great Recession, and a surge of digitization initiatives undertaken within both fields. Historically, museologists and librarians had distinct ways of serving their patrons in terms of vision, operating guidelines, and the types of resources they preserved. Whereas librarians served as gatekeepers of printed materials, which they made accessible to patrons for research and leisure endeavors, museologists amassed historical and cultural objects that they put on display to tell a story about local, national, or international events or issues. While museums base their exhibits on narrow topics with visually appealing artifacts that can attract paying customers, libraries provide patrons with free information on a wide variety of topics (Given & McTavish, 2010, p. 14). Both fields have unique approaches to educating their patrons as there is not a singular degree program that combines both fields. Librarians receive a professional education from universities accredited by the American Library Association (ALA), whereas museologists obtain degrees in related areas, such as history, which provides a springboard of knowledge to operate a museum. Despite historical differences, as government budgets shrink, the two fields will increasingly be forced to intersect and operate in unison. That means that professionals from both fields will have to learn to facilitate each other's mission in order to serve patrons expeditiously. Supporting the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is a great way to achieve that unity.

In 1996, the United States Congress established the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in order to promote greater access to and preservation of library

and museum resources (IMLS About Us). This agency created under the Library Services and Technology Act and the Museum Services Act is an independent federal agency that provides grants to libraries and museums across the nation to help them fulfill their missions. Grants exist for outstanding youth programs, professional development, statewide initiatives, and museum operations. The IMLS does not only support history or science museums but they also support aquariums, planetariums, zoos, and other areas of cultural importance (IMLS Eligibility Criteria). While this agency serves a useful purpose in the preservation of American culture, there are some in Congress who want to see the agency privatized. In the Republican-controlled House of Representatives' budget resolution for 2015, it was proposed that the federal government stop funding the organization and instead leave that responsibility to state and local governments, along with private foundations. According to the report, protecting American treasures is not a federal responsibility (House of Representatives). While conservatives have long favored conducting business at the state/local government level, reduced tax revenues of the Great Recession and a growing federal deficit have intensified this traditional desire, especially in terms of supporting social programs and organizations (Marcum, 2014, p. 78). While the politicization of libraries and museums is in progress, luckily, the IMLS has not been scrapped just yet.

By applying for funding from the IMLS and working with the Digital Archive Network for Anthropology and World Heritage, libraries and museums can build upon their digital collections. Digitization is not just a time consuming process but it is also a costly endeavor undertaken by museums and libraries. The Digital Archives Network helps to fund digitization projects that support the preservation of world heritage artifacts,

such as Michelangelo's *David*. By placing materials in an asynchronous environment, patrons will no longer need to leave the comfort of their homes in order to visit museums or libraries. This benefits people not just in the U.S. but also serves as an educational resource for people around the world who will also learn from these resources. Libraries are digitizing not just their records but they are also expanding on their e-book and other digital subscriptions, and providing online reference assistance to patrons. Meanwhile museums are creating virtual representations of their physical environment that allow users to click on and zoom in on resources from their permanent collections. Museums are also digitally recording their temporary exhibits in order to retain a permanent record of them (Tonta, 2008, p. 5). While digitization provides an alternative to physically visiting these organizations, there is no substitute for the intangibles, such as face-to-face interaction, the aura that cultural objects may provide when they are in front of the visitor, and the collective story that can be seen by taking an overall perspective of an exhibit. When possible, it is always nice to visit a library or cultural heritage site in person.

As budget shortages persist in the present political environment, libraries and archives are being consolidated. This was the case at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, which combined the university's library, museum, and archives all together. As visitors enter the facility, they step into the university's museum, with library materials on the second floor (Dupont, 2007, p. 13). In order to improve cohesion among librarians, archivists, and museologists, these three distinct entities, the Joint Committee on Libraries and Archives and Museums (CALM) was established and meets three times per year in order to improve rapport among the groups

(p. 14). As libraries and museums have distinct operating procedures, there is a tendency for people within each group to be competitive with one another and to view their group's their operating style as superior to the other (p. 16). This is the complete opposite perspective that needs to be followed. An old saying goes that people should "treat others how they want to be treated."

Librarians can take the lead in trying to improve relations with museologists. One way of doing that is for librarians to participate in professional development activities within a museum. By doing so, librarians can better understand how museums operate and why they operate in the manner that they do. This same strategy can work in reverse for museums as well. Libraries and museums need to have a well advertised explanation for how professionals in like-minded fields can assist them with their work. Librarians and museologists have more in common than they disagree on. Perhaps librarians could invite museologists to library functions and the favor could be returned?

Improving communication is the key to a successful union between these two professions. Attending CALM meetings and subscribing/participating in news forums, such as the Florida Libraries and Museum (FLAM) group are great ways to expand on the mutual desire of libraries and museums to educate and preserve resources that will be treasured for generations. As digitization becomes a bigger prerogative of libraries and museums, both entities can combine their resources and/or engage in inter-organization/inter-department support by creating combined web experiences that utilize the library's informational resources to expand users' understanding of the visual objects contained in digital exhibits (Marcum, 2014, p.78).

References

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